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"WHAT HAS HAPPENED?" LINDSAY SAID, QUICKLY. "IS MADDIE ILL?"

JULIAN COLONNA.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

"Well, Lindsay, what do you think of Mr. Colonna?"

"I have not seen him yet! Hand me that jar of sugar, please, Maddie!"

Maddie obeyed, remarking, almost petulantly,—

"Why he rode past not ten minutes ago! You must have heard the sound of his horse's hoofs!"

"I don't feel enough interest in Mr. Colonna to run away from my pudding on his account!" said Lindsay, lifting up a thin crust from the rolling-board in her white, shapely hands, and depositing it skilfully over the pudding basin that stood close by.

Maddie watched her for a moment in silence as she manipulated her crust into its right position, then she broke out,—

"You are so odd, Lindsay; you have no curiosity! One would think we were flooded with visitors in this out-of-the-way corner of the earth, and that a dozen more or less made no difference to you! Everybody else is wild to know all about Mr. Colonna, and you are absolutely indifferent!"

"Other people are less busy than I am, I suppose!" replied Lindsay, composedly, as she took up a knife to cut away the superfluous bits of crust. "I have quite as much to do in this out-of-the-way corner of the earth as I should have if I lived in London, only it is a different kind of work, that's all; and Dame Nature forgot to endow me with curiosity, I suppose! However, chick," she looked up now with a bright smile, "I am ready to hear all you have to tell me about Mr. Colonna!"

"Oh!" cried Maddie, eagerly, vaulting on to a corner of the great stalwart kitchen table. "I

don't know much yet, but I want to know all I can! I suppose he is well off, as he rides a beautiful horse; besides, he couldn't have Friar's Place for nothing, though I daresay he doesn't pay much for it—what do you think?"

"The house is in good repair, but the gardens are a mere wilderness!" said Lindsay, tying up her pudding basin.

"Yes, and not a thing has been done to them," said Maddie, as eagerly as if she were personally concerned in the matter; "but I like Mr. Colonna's looks!" she added, going off at a tangent. "I don't know what you would think—you so often call people plain that I think handsome, and the other way about; but Mr. Colonna is tall and slight and handsome in the face, according to my notions—not very dark either, though I suppose he is Italian!"

"By descent, perhaps!"

Lindsay went to the fire-place to put her pudding in the pot, and Maddie jumped to her feet.

"You haven't asked if he's a bachelor or a widower!" she said.

"He may be neither the one nor the other. He may have a wife living!" said Lindsay.

This idea had not presented itself to Maddie. She looked meditatively at the fire.

"Separated, do you mean?" she asked.

"My dear girl, I only hazarded a conjecture! Don't go and tell all Westholt that Mr. Colonna has quarrelled with his wife!"

Maddie laughed, not at all offended by this fling at her love of gossip.

"I don't believe he has a wife!" she said. "I shall soon find out. He isn't too old to flirt with you know, Lindsay!"

"Take care!" was Lindsay's warning answer; and Maddie coloured, laughed again, and teased her pretty head.

"All right," said she, briefly; and afraid possibly that her sister might say something more, which she did not want to hear, she ran out through the open door into the garden, and presently flitted away to the orchard to eat apples while Lindsay cleared up the kitchen-table; that was the difference between Lindsay's lot and Maddie's.

Maddie's to idle and live in the sunshine; Lindsay's to work; Lindsay's to prepare the food, and Maddie's to eat it. Lindsay to think and plan, and guide, Maddie's to "dance and sing the hours away," with never a thought more serious than whether blue or pink would most become her, or what flowers she should wear for some festivity, and even then the case was generally referred to Lindsay. Lindsay never, in the inmost recesses of her thoughts, grumbled at her lot; indeed, it was chiefly her own making.

Maddie was to her a kind of mingling of doll and idol! it never occurred to her that she was spoiling her lovely young sister by taking the whole burden of life off her shoulders. She had always done so, even when they were both children; and Maddie, indolent, thoughtless and self-indulgent, accepted the position as complacently as Lindsay accorded it.

Everybody said Lindsay Mansfield ought to have been born a man—everybody, that is, with the usual limitation, which means that there are several dissentients from the general opinion.

"Why should Lindsay have been born a man?" said the rector's wife, and a good many others also, when she did all that a man could do! No farm in the parish was better managed than Beechmore, and no house kept in better order than the old Elizabethan farmhouse on the hillside. A man could have managed the farm, but where would he be in the house, while Lindsay was a man out of doors, and a woman at home!

It was some years now since Lindsay had taken upon her young shoulders the entire management of Beechmore Farm; and hitherto the experiment, regarded by Westholt as a very bold, nay, rash one, had been a success; at any rate, Lindsay kept herself and her sister, and never owed a penny to anyone.

The elder girl had been only a baby when her widowed father came to Beechmore. He had been a gentleman farmer, but his estate was heavily encumbered before he came into possession, and at length ruin came; then Mr. Mansfield took to real—not *distant*—farming for a living, and thrived at it fairly well.

Beechmore was a medium-sized farm, in thorough working order, and the landlord was glad to let it to a desirable tenant at a moderate rent. After a time Mr. Mansfield married again—a pretty Yorkshire girl; he himself came from the south, but his second wife only lived a year after the birth of her only child; so Lindsay—then between eight and nine years old—commenced betimes her life of usefulness and self-abnegation.

"Teach me to be a farmer, father," she said; "and I shall be able to help you."

She was an apt pupil, and when at twenty she found herself alone in the world, with Maddie to keep as well as herself, she resolved to farm Beechmore herself.

She went in person to the landlord, and asked to be allowed to rent the farm for a year at least; if at the end of that time she was successful she would beg for a renewal of the lease.

The energy and enterprise of the young girl, her noble and dignified bearing, her quiet confidence in herself—far different from conceit—carried the day. The grace was given, and at the end of the year, Lindsay, then twenty-one, made out so good a title for the desired lease that the landlord instantly renewed it.

Five years had passed since then, and Lindsay still worked with untiring energy, and paid her way.

She was up with the sun, and often out in the fields, looking after some of the farm work, or had done as much household work as would have taken some of her neighbours half a day to get through, before Maddie had opened her blue eyes; and Maddie would come down to breakfast in some dainty gown, with lace at her throat and wrists, and a flower stuck in her belt or on her left shoulder, while Lindsay's tall light figure flitted about in blue serge or cotton, with a bib apron over the front, and the sleeves tucked up to the elbow.

But this was quite in the order of things; Maddie was—

"Rose lined from the cold
And meant verily to hold
Life's pure pleasures manifold."

She was not fit to work, and why should she work, with Lindsay there to do everything for her!

Maddie was a beauty—a universally spoilt darling. All the young men were ready to lay lace in rest in defence of her charms, or perform prodigies of valour to win a smile from her; but Lindsay had never had a lover, and had never wanted one. She was not a beauty; no one would look at her when Maddie was by, and this fact was rather pleasing to Lindsay than otherwise.

She thought love-making—Maddie's love-making, at any rate—very stupid, and often made fun of it, which Maddie didn't mind a bit.

But Lindsay never supposed that, even if Maddie were out of the way, any one would give her a second look, though, to be sure, she had never troubled her head about the matter. And to Maddie's surprise, who considered flirtations the salt of life—not that she would have married anyone of the young farmers among whom she scattered her smiles as impartially as she bestowed them on the curate, the doctor's young partner, or any of the other gentlemen of the neighbourhood.

She never forgot that she was a lady born and bred; but gentlemen were scarce in Westholt, and there was not an atom of harm in flirting, Maddie thought. She treated all admirers alike, and none of them expected anything serious to come of the small favours she accorded them. Lindsay was a good deal of the same opinion, though she regarded the matter from a wholly different point of view.

She looked upon Maddie's "nonsense," as she called it, in the light of a kitten's pranks, and only now and then administered a word of reproof when the girl went further than seemed consistent with dignity or right feeling.

The men, Lindsay reflected, were as much to blame as Maddie was, or more so. Why couldn't they let her alone! If they would make fools of themselves they could not wonder that a beautiful girl, full of health and high spirits, took advantage of the power literally forced into her hands; and Lindsay did not believe that the kitten's play could inflict any serious wounds.

"Men's hearts are not easily broken," she said to herself. "And as for Maddie—her heart hasn't grown yet."

Of course a good deal of Maddie's flirtation, most of it, indeed, was carried on out of Lindsay's sight, for Maddie "went everywhere," while Lindsay seldom went anywhere, and gossips had long ago found out that there was no use in coming to Lindsay with tales of Maddie's doings.

The elder sister did not think her darling faultless—far from it. She was fully and painfully aware of Maddie's shortcomings, but she would not allow other tongues to assail her; and, indeed, hated gossip of any kind.

Therefore some called her proud and stuck up,

and unsociable; and angrily recalled—what her speech, and manner never allowed to be forgotten—her southern birth and gentle lineage.

But no one could say that Lindsay Mansfield was too proud to put her hand to anything.

She was not half as proud as the farmers' daughters around her, many of whom would scorn to make butter, or even feed the chickens; and when any help was wanted—when there was need of the steady hand and strong will, of the clear brain and tender helpful, womanly sympathy—it was always Lindsay that was sent for, and the appeal never came in vain.

CHAPTER II.

"LINDSAY," said Maddie, coming into the kitchen a few mornings later, "What do you think of the weather! You're so awfully weather-wise!"

Maddie had only just finished breakfast, though it was nearly ten o'clock, but she had been to a party the night before, and been tired this morning; so she lounged in bed as long as she liked, and Lindsay made her some specially dainty dish for breakfast.

Maddie was somewhat of an epicure, and had a remarkably good appetite; Lindsay ate sparingly, and cared little what she had, so long as the material was fine in quality and well served.

Lindsay, in her serge morning gown and bibbed apron, was giving directions to one of the maids about some dairy operation.

She turned and looked with a half smile, well pleased with Maddie's fresh young beauty, shined in a pretty pale blue gown, trimmed with work of Maddie's own doing.

Ornamental needlework was a strong point with Maddie; needlework of any kind was Lindsay's weakest point—she rarely touched a needle.

"Why are you so anxious about the weather, Maddie?" she asked.

"You forget the picnic to-morrow; and I want to go to Thornton for a new pair of gloves!"

"Aye, I had forgotten."

Lindsay went to the door, and gave a quick keen survey of the sky; she came back shaking her head.

"I wouldn't go far this morning, Maddie; there is a heavy bank of clouds in the west that is sure to come over here in an hour or two. Wait till the afternoon."

"That may be wet too!" said Maddie, pouting.

"So it may, chick, but it may not; and if it only rains a little I will ride over for you."

Maddie's brows cleared at once.

"Oh, Lindsay, how good of you; but—" she had the grace to add—"I don't want you to get wet."

"A wetting won't hurt me!" said Lindsay, with a bright, soft laugh—Lindsay had a delicious laugh; "so make yourself happy about the gloves."

It was one of Lindsay's traditions that Maddie was delicate, and needed a good deal of care; and Maddie, to a certain extent, encouraged this masculine propensity of her sister to fuss over her pet; it was "interesting" to need care, and very convenient, too, for it caused Lindsay to take much upon herself than otherwise Maddie could not have possibly shifted from her own shoulders; but, in reality, Maddie was as healthy a young woman as any in the three Ridings, and she took good heed that Lindsay's ideas did not interfere with any pleasure upon which she was bent.

Lizzie, the dairymaid, did not hesitate to tell Lindsay her opinion, which was that Miss Maddie was just as strong as anyone need be.

"She's a deal plumper than you be yourself, Miss Lindsay, and has more colour; only you must be petting her up, that's all."

Lizzie was one of the very few not wretched out of their common-sense by Maddie's beauty.

"She hasn't the worth of Miss Lindsay's little finger-nail in her whole body," she used to say—though never this to Lindsay; "and all the chaps after her. Great fools! I know which I'd run after if I was a man."

Maddie now retreated to the porch, where she sat down, and took some embroidery out of her pocket, and a lovely picture she made, in the frame of green leaves and roses, with the flickering sunlight dancing over her in a thousand glancing rays.

George Eliot has a striking passage—and so also has Buchanan in one of his poems—about the sentiment which mere physical beauty possesses, carrying to the beholder an impression of thoughts, feelings, and aspirations which have no existence in the soul encased in so fair a body.

Maddie Mansfield was not such a heartless puppet as Hetty Sorel, whose beauty evoked that fine criticism of George Eliot's; but she had not a tinge of the feeling that she gained credit for; but those blue eyes seemed to have a hundred varying expressions, while in truth they had only a number of half-conscious tricks. Their owner knew as well how to use them, though she had been brought up in the arcadian simplicity of a Yorkshire farm house, as if she had had the instructions of a dozen West-end belles and Mayfair salons as a field of study.

No one could find a fault of expression, or a lack of it, about such perfect bow lips; in fact, you could not be coldly critical when you looked at Maddie Mansfield—you saw a vision of dazzling complexion, rose-tinted on cheek and lips, blue eyes, and light sunny hair falling all over the prettiest of shoulders; you saw a witch, laughing, happy, coquettish, and straightway you felt as the hero of the "Gardener's Daughter" felt when he saw that damsel gathering a rose; and if you did not recall Tennyson's lines it was because Maddie made you forget everything but herself.

There was a half smile on the girl's lips at this moment; she was thinking of young Farmer Ingledew, who had brought her home last night, and had held her hand rather longer than necessary when he left her at the door.

It was a rather pleasant recollection, for Ingledew was of the yeoman class—something more than a mere farmer, a rich man—owning one of the largest farms in the Ridgins, and therefore a great "catch;" so Maddie knew many a female heart would beat enviously if Robert Ingledew became her bond slave.

She had no more serious feeling for the young man than she had for anyone else; but she loved conquest, and she loved to let other girls see how easy conquest was to her. From the kitchen came Lindsay's clear rich contralto, singing some German lied.

Lindsay was a good German scholar, and sang German songs much better than Maddie could sing anything; and all the while the elder girl was busy about her work.

"I wonder what she is thinking about!" said Maddie to herself, her thought going off from last night's little episode to Lindsay, or rather bringing Lindsay into this picture! "She never dreams about lovers!"

"Maddie!" said Lindsay, suddenly, breaking off in the middle of the *lied*, and coming out to the porch; "shall I make you an apple pie to-day, or what else would you like?"

What a descent! Maddie's half compassionate reflection about her sister's meditations was brought down abruptly to apple-pie; that was all Lindsay was thinking about, while she, Maddie, was living over again a sweet idyl in the flower-scented porch. She looked round with a smile rippling over her mouth; and Lindsay, whose perceptions were wonderfully keen and accurate, caught the meaning of the smile and laughed out.

"Poor Maddie!" said she, "have I been hurling apple-pie at the head of an arcadian shepherd? But I can't help it, you know; your thoughts are always running on some lover nonsense or other; but then you are not indifferent to pies and puddings either, so I have to take my chance of disturbing a charming reverie by a very sublimary question."

"Oh! Lindsay, what a quiz you are!" said Maddie, putting her arm round her sister, and looking up with still laughing eyes into the face so different from her own. "Don't you ever think about such things?"

"Not I, chick, I have something better to do. You can have the love-making, and welcome; it isn't in my line."

"You will fancy yourself plain, Lindsay, but you're handsome, you are," with an energetic nod, as Lindsay laughed good-naturedly at her sister's partiality; "Mrs. Dormer says you are"—Mrs. Dormer was the rector's wife—"and Mr. Johnson, and Alice Wytherow, and lots of others," concluded Maddie, emphatically, "so it isn't only I that say it!"

"Very well, my dear, I'm a Venus de Milo, if you like," said Lindsay, stroking her sister's long fair tresses—her own dark chestnut hair was worn short—clustering over her head in thick, natural curls; "but you have not answered me yet about the pie!"

"Oh, dear!" Maddie half sighed, but that was a little bit of affectation, as Lindsay very well knew. It was to please Maddie that the elder girl made all the "nice things" which she would never have taken the trouble to make for herself. After a pause Maddie said, softly, "Wouldn't green-gage pie be jolly, Lindsay?"

"So it would! I'll run and pick the green-gages before the rain comes on; it'll be down upon us in a few minutes!"

She ran lightly away to the orchard. Maddie might have offered to go, the work would not even have soiled her hands, but she preferred sitting where she was, and Maddie never dreamt of doing anything she had no mind for.

Scarcely had Lindsay returned to the kitchen with her basket of green-gages when the rain began to fall in big, heavy drops.

"We are in for it now," said Lindsay, plunging her hands into the flour tub; but in another moment she called out, "Maddie, there is someone out there in the rain; pop on my cloak and run and bring him in. I'm all over flour!"

Maddie looked, uttered an exclamation, and darting into the kitchen, exclaimed, breathlessly,—

"Oh, Lindsay! it's Mr. Colonna! Shan't I wait till he gets round by the front door?"

"Stuff!" interrupted the other, "the shortest road is the best when a man's in the rain! Run on!"

Maddie obeyed instantly, hastily wrapping herself in Lindsay's cloak, which hung behind the door, and was so long for her *petite* figure that she had to gather it up out of the wet.

She would never have thought of disobeying Lindsay in any case, but there was no sting in obedience just now.

It was quite an adventure to have the mysterious tenant of Friar's Place sheltering from the rain under the roof of Beechmore.

So it came to pass that Mr. Colonna was arrested in his rapid walk by the sight of the loveliest face imaginable looking out flushed and smiling from under a dark hood, while a fresh young voice exclaimed, breathlessly,—

"Please will you come in and take shelter!" He turned instantly, hither his felt hat, though it was raining smartly.

"I am so much obliged to you; but pray run in, I will follow!"

"Oh, I am all covered!" said Maddie, laughing, and trotting along to keep pace with her companion's long stride. "I am so glad we saw you—at least, Lindsay did—for the village is nearly a mile off, and there is no shelter any nearer than that!"

Maddie's childlike manner of way and talking was one of her many charms. She spoke of "Lindsay" as if Mr. Colonna knew all about the farm and its inmates.

He wondered who Lindsay was, but supposed it must be this little witch's brother.

He was undeceived, for as he paused, hat in hand, on the threshold of the large, spotlessly clean kitchen, Maddie said,—

"Here is Mr. Colonna, Lindsay," and the tenant of Friar's Place was bowing to a tall, slim girl, about twenty, as he surmised, with a pale face, large bright hazel eyes, floury hands, and a big apron.

"It was very kind of you to take pity on me," he said, with a certain gravity of manner and a freedom from embarrassment that was not quite

English; "otherwise I believe I should have been tolerably drenched before I could reach home!"

"You would, indeed!" said Lindsay, laughing, frankly. She was the most unconventional of mortals. "But maybe, Mr. Colonna, you would prefer to sit down in the parlour, unless you like the fire," thinking she saw him glance that way.

Mr. Colonna instantly caught at the implied permission to remain where he was, either for the reason Lindsay had supposed, or because he preferred the genial mental atmosphere of the kitchen to the more stately region of the parlour, with Maddie playing the part of enforced entertainer.

"If you don't mind me," said he, smiling. "I would rather stay here. Thank you so much," as Maddie placed a chair for him near the fire, seating herself at the opposite corner.

"I never make a stranger of anyone," said Lindsay, simply.

"I am glad to hear you say that; it will prevent me feeling that I am repaying your kindness by hindering you."

"I am too busy to allow of being hindered," said Lindsay, smilingly; "so if anyone comes in before my leisure time they have to choose one of two courses—to keep out of my way, or to be content that I shall go on with my work."

This was what Maddie called one of Lindsay's brusque speeches, and she said,—

"Oh, Lindsay!" under her breath; but it did not seem brusque as Lindsay spoke it—for, energetic though she was, her manner was rarely otherwise than gentle, and she had such a bright way of speaking, such an expressive, finely modulated voice, that she could say many things which from other people would possibly give offence.

Mr. Colonna did not think her last speech brusque; he thought he had never before in all his varied experiences come across such an original young woman as this, and he would like to know more about her. He replied, smiling,—

"I have chosen the latter course, and perhaps I may learn something by doing so—"

"How to make a pie," put in Maddie; "don't you know anything of the process, Mr. Colonna?"

"I am afraid not. I should not advise anyone to eat a pie of my making."

"That isn't a man's province, is it?" said Lindsay, who was mixing the materials in a basin, "though perhaps you think in a few years, at any rate, the men will have to do the housework while the women go to the office."

"You do both, Lindsay!" observed Maddie, again interposing.

She did not quite admire listening to a duet between Mr. Colonna and Lindsay.

She was accustomed to receive the major part of the attention of any male creature who happened to be present, and to play completely second fiddle to her elder sister was not to be thought of. Lindsay looked a little annoyed at Maddie's remark; seeming to give to her own a personal application.

"I do what lies before me," she said, drily, adding directly,—

"I don't think you know our name, Mr. Colonna, though we know yours; in a little place like this strangers are noticed at once. Mansfield is our name."

"Thank you. No, I did not know your name; but I have no doubt I should soon have heard it; only I have been here so short a time, and hitherto I have been hardly anywhere."

"Do you like this part of the world?" asked Maddie.

He turned towards her, and smiled almost involuntarily at her winsome beauty. It was difficult to avoid calling her "child" or "pretty one," as if she had been in short frocks; but then Mr. Colonna was forty at the least—perhaps more—only he was a man to carry his years lightly, and always look younger than he was.

"The country round about is very pretty," he said, "so far as I have seen it. It is the first time I have been in Yorkshire."

"Is it?" said Maddie, wonderingly. Mr. Colonna gave her the impression of a man who

had travelled a great deal, and it seemed odd that Yorkshire had not been included in his peregrinations, though why Maddie would have found it hard to explain. "Do you like the people?" she added, point blank.

"I have scarcely seen anything of them!" replied he, evidently amused. "You have lived here some time I suppose, but you are not north-country people."

"We have lived here ever since Lindsay was a little thing, and I was born here!" said Maddie. "My mother was a Yorkshire woman, but our father came from Wiltshire, and Lindsay is all south-country. Some of the people haven't forgiven us for being 'foreigners.' I think they're very nice, on the whole; but they're rough. Lindsay thinks them rougher than I do; but then she has more to do with the farm-servants. Lindsay is a farmer, you know!"

"A farmer!" repeated Mr. Colonna, looking at Lindsay, who had just closed the oven door on her pie, and was beginning to wonder when and how Maddie's prattle would end.

"Are you a practical exponent of women's rights, Miss Mansfield?"

"Yes!" she said, quietly, lifting her clear hazel eyes to the guest's face for a moment. "That's the real kernel of a woman's rights, I take it—to do any work that you can do, without caring whether it is a man's or a woman's work; and if you can't do it let it alone. My father was a farmer, and I learnt the business from him; so when he died I took it up, and it is as good a business as any other, if you attend to it properly!"

"And do you really work this farm yourself?" said Mr. Colonna, much interested. "I hope you will not think me inquisitive, but a lady-farmer is rather unique in England, I fancy. I have met a few, and heard of others in the United States."

"You mean," said Lindsay, "do I really overlook the work myself, or am I as you would expect to find a woman, little more than a dilettante, leaving the real management to a practical man? No! If I had done that I should have been scheduled long ago. The only people under me are servants, who do my bidding. I know the business from end to end, and not a thing is done on the farm without my direct supervision. That's the only way to make farming or any other business pay, isn't it?"

"Ay, truly; but surely it is an onerous charge. Is not the work too much for you?"

"It is hard work; but so is any work, if one is to live by it, and, of course, method is the chief thing! Then the whole machine goes with scarcely a hitch. A woman can be methodical, sometimes," added she laughing, and going out to the sink to wash the flour off her hands.

There was a minute's silence. Mr. Colonna was looking thoughtfully into the fire, and Maddie was looking at him, reflecting that she should like him very much, and if he would be sociable he would prove a decided acquisition to Westholt society.

He was handsome—yes, even Lindsay, who was so particular, would be sure to allow that. His features were well cut, and he had nice curly, dark hair; his eyes were large and bright—they had a very penetrating look, too.

Maddie would feel afraid of them if she had done anything to be ashamed of; she liked the expression of his mouth. It was a little stern now, but not when he spoke, and he had a sweet, kind smile—then he was a gentleman! So were the Squire's son, and the doctor, and the rector; but they were country gentlemen—brusque in manner and speech, talking loud, with a provincial accent, and wearing clothes made by a York or Bradford tailor at the best. But Mr. Colonna was southern; indeed, had something of a foreign manner, as it seemed to Maddie, whose experience was of necessity limited; and he spoke softly, in crisply turned English that sounded very musical after the harsh Yorkshire accent. His clothes also were London-made; at least they looked different from what Maddie was accustomed to see.

She might lack the knowledge to distinguish between London and Paris make, but no one possesses more thoroughly of the feminine acumen in

the matter of clothes than did Maddie. She could not always classify her specimens, but she could detect the differences between them with unerring precision.

The silence in the kitchen lasted a minute; it was not likely to last longer when Maddie sat at one side of the fire and the lord of creation at the other.

Maddie's tongue could always wag when there was a man to listen to it; and, to do her justice, it was seldom still for long together, even though no better listener than the kitten or King, the great mastiff, could be found.

"Do you think it dreadful for a woman to be a farmer?" she asked, in that direct, childish way of hers which made it impossible to feel vexed with her, even when—as now—the question was really a silly one; besides, who could be angry with such a witch!

Not Mr. Colonna, certainly; for he smiled indulgently as he replied,—

"Why should you imagine I think it dreadful. On the contrary, I like a woman to be independent and enterprising. You are not a farmer, then, Miss Madeleine?"

"I!" opening the blue eyes wide. "Oh, no! Do you know, Mr. Colonna, I can hardly tell a turnip from a potato. Lindsay says so, at least; and as to the seasons of different things, I couldn't learn them if I tried."

"And you have never tried, I suppose? Well, I am afraid I am not much wiser; but then, I am town-bred—and agriculture has not come in my way; but a country girl ought to be wiser!"

"What does it matter?" said Maddie, with a pretty shrug. "I shouldn't have to put such knowledge into practice."

"Don't you think all knowledge is useful?"

"I suppose it is—in a way," said Maddie, vaguely. She did not quite fathom the sentiment, and did not approve of so grave a turn being given to the conversation. She did not at all mind being treated almost as a child; she rather posed as an *ingénue*; but then it must be as a petted child; not one who has to be found fault with.

Lindsay's reappearance in the kitchen checked whatever rejoinder Mr. Colonna had been about to make, and he hailed her presence as a relief. Perhaps, just now, he felt more at home with the strong trained, capable elder sister than with the far more beautiful babbling younger one. Maddie's day might come later.

CHAPTER III.

THE rain still fell heavily, and there was no sign of a break in the black canopy of clouds.

Colonna rose as Lindsay came in from the outer kitchen, and went to the window anxiously surveying the sky.

"I think," he said, turning round and addressing Lindsay; "that I must brave the elements; there does not seem the remotest chance at present of a change for the better."

"Are you pressed for time?" said Lindsay. "If so, if you must go through the rain, I can let you have a horse—my own horse. I am sorry I have no covered carriage of any sort available; but it is a good two miles and a half to Friar's Place. You would get soaked through before you reached it."

"I don't fancy that would hurt me, Miss Mansfield. I have had many a drenching before now in the course of my travels."

"Still, if you are not obliged to get this drenching, pray don't incur it on our account. I am afraid that is what you are thinking about. I hope you won't mind my saying so; but you see I have not made a stranger of you, Mr. Colonna, have I?"

"No, indeed! You have made me feel quite at home, but I don't think that ought to make me forget that I have already been here a long time."

"Remember or forget," said Lindsay, smiling; "but please don't turn out in such a storm. The rain in these parts comes sweeping down in perfect sheets of water; I have been drenched to the skin in five minutes. Perhaps"—glancing

at the clock—"you would stay to dinner with us; we should be most happy if you would—and then," added Lindsay, stooping down to the oven to turn her pie, "you can tell me what you think of my pie-making. Maddie believes me worthy of a *cordon bleu*!"

"I have no doubt your sister is right," said Mr. Colonna, "though I doubt my judgment on the point being worth much; but I am delighted to accept your kind invitation without the last inducement!"

"I couldn't say the same!" exclaimed Maddie, shaking her head. "Plum pie would be a great inducement to me. 'Don't you care for such things, Mr. Colonna?'"

"No, Miss Madeleine, I am sorry to say I don't. Eating and drinking are to me among the sheer necessities of life—not its luxuries."

Lindsay glanced at the speaker and smiled to herself to think how few of his sex would agree with him. She was pleased to hear him express such indifference; she hated any animal propensity.

Maddie said, without hesitation,—

"All the men I have known till now, Mr. Colonna, like their dinners. You ought to be put under a glass case."

"I daresay I shall find before long," said he, "that I live in a glass house."

"Ay!" said Lindsay, for Maddie looked a little puzzled; "already, I daresay, some of the people know a good deal more about you than you know about yourself, though you live some way from the village."

"I have heard one or two amusing tales already from my servant," said Mr. Colonna, smiling. "He has, of course, been into the village, and some of the good people have tried to pump him; but Felton is a very reticent fellow; he picks up a great deal, but he tells nothing."

"A close tongue makes a wise head," said Lindsay, and she went out to the parlour to lay the cloth.

Julian Colonna had dined in princely mansions at home and abroad; greater abundance of silver there might be, more costly viands, rich wines, and servants to wait, but more perfect refinement there could not be than in the service of this mid-day meal in a Yorkshire farm-house.

There was plenty without the somewhat gross abundance usual on country dinner tables of the middle class, and rather trying to the more fastidious taste of town-bred guests; everything was good, and cooked to perfection, and the table was graced by flowers and fruit arranged with a keen eye to rustic effect.

The same soothing air of refinement pervaded the old-fashioned room, with its high wainscots, heavy beam across the ceiling, and deep embossed window.

It was clearly not the "best room" of people who habitually lived in the kitchen, but an off-used home.

The furniture was not new, some of it belonging to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and would have delighted an antiquary; the carpet and curtains were faded, but there was a cottage piano at one side of the room, there were books in a bookcase and on side tables, a work basket on a little stand, two or three of the current magazines, a mass of flowers on the wide window-sill, a few really good engravings on the walls, but no cheap gaudy daubs or common photographs stuck about promiscuously.

Everywhere were the evidences of cultivation and good taste—the nameless grace that pervades a place where a fine lady presides.

Possibly this sense of home saddened while it soothed the tenant of Friar's Place. Certainly there was nothing of home about that dreary and half-ruinous mansion where he lived alone, among vast empty chambers, and his own footsteps must make a thousand echoes in the long passages, and no one accustomed to a home could elect to live in a manner only befitting a hermit.

Lindsay had not a particle of vulgar curiosity, and if she had never seen Julian Colonna she would probably never have given him or his eccentric choice of a dwelling a second thought; but he was a man of a too distinctly individual type

to fail in arousing some interest in an observant, sympathetic mind like Lindsay's.

Maddie saw in him a handsome, grave-looking, but agreeable man. Lindsay saw that he had suffered much. Maddie thought of him as she did of all men more or less in relation to herself.

Lindsay never thought of anyone in relation to herself. She wondered what could make this man come to a remote part of Yorkshire—to a place where he was admittedly a stranger—and choose to live alone in a dreary wilderness, at a long distance from even such limited society as a village afforded.

There was nothing about him to suggest the idea that he was hiding, and he was clearly not a misanthrope; yet, from what passed at the dinner-table, he seemed to shrink from rather than court the company of his neighbours.

The rector, he said, had called while he was out, and he had not returned the call. Somebody else—Mrs. Somebody—also had called, and he had equally neglected to return that civility.

"Mrs. Moreland, it was, I daresay," observed Maddie.

"How do you know?" asked Colonna, amused. "Because she is such a busybody. If you had seen her she would have cross-questioned you, and told you all the news, and what you ought to do about the place, and everything."

"She must be a terrible woman," said the guest, half-glancing at Lindsay, as if to seek confirmation of this unenviable description.

Lindsay smiled.

"She is a great gossip," she said, "but she is an extreme case. Some of the people are well worth knowing. I think you would like the rector and his wife, and the doctor is a very good fellow—rather rough, perhaps, but then he is north-country."

"There is a squire, I suppose?"

"Yes, Squire Brancepeth; he is lord of the manor, but we don't see much of him, he is old and ailing. The young squire is about a good deal; he is away just at present."

Maddie's eyes were bent down; the rose tint on her cheek deepened; she felt that Colonna's penetrating eyes rested on her face for a second. He asked if the young squire was liked in the place.

"Very well liked," said Lindsay; "he is open-handed and fond of hunting, but he knows more about dogs and horses than about anything else."

Maddie looked up quickly, but closed her lips. Some tender passages had passed between her and the young squire, and she did not like to hear Lindsay speak of him so slightly, yet she felt ashamed to champion him before Mr. Colonna.

She said with a little laugh,—

"Lindsay wants everybody to be so awfully clever, Mr. Colonna."

The laugh and the words, and the manner in which they were said, jarred. The girl would not directly defend young Brancepeth, so she had a fling at his detractor. Lindsay changed colour; she was pained for her sister. Mr. Colonna replied directly, with his bright smile,—

"I don't know that what your sister said implied so much, Miss Madeleine; no one need be 'awfully clever' to know something beyond dogs and horses."

"Mr. Brancepeth does know something beyond dogs and horses," said Maddie, in a manner which she tried hard to render dignified, but which betrayed a petulance too really childlike to be anything but amusing to a man of the world, though perhaps Colonna attributed this little bit of temper to the wrong cause. Maddie's vexation at this moment had nothing at all to do with the young squire; she was angry that the guest had taken Lindsay's part, and, in a fashion, rebuked her.

All the men she had hitherto known were ready to swear black was white if that would please her; and if Mr. Colonna was going to "take her up" like this she should dislike him.

Lindsay knew very well what was the matter; but Mr. Colonna even if he had had a longer acquaintance with Maddie, would not have fathomed her. Men never understand a coquette, so he did the very thing which Lindsay said to

himself he ought not to have done—begged Maddie's pardon, and laughingly made his peace, and Maddie was as bright as a sunbeam again.

After dinner Lindsay and one of the maids cleared away, and then Lindsay vanished, and Julian Colonna was left in the parlour with Maddie.

She prattled away to him, showed him books and photographs, and told him the plot of the tale she was reading in one of the magazines; and while she talked she looked so lovely that no male creature could have harshly winnowed her chatter, which really had in it far more chaff than wheat.

And, indeed, it was something like sitting by a brook-side and looking through half-shut eyes at the silvery water, and listening dreamily to its babble, to sit and look at and listen to Maddie. There was no need to speak much, no need to take in half she said. It was a pleasure just to look at her, a pleasure wholly absorbing to a younger and differently constituted man, but which, at any rate, was a wholly surface feeling with Julian Colonna; his thoughts were more with the elder sister than the younger.

She had opened to him a perfectly new experience. How could he enlarge and extend it? Could he ask permission to call again?

It did not seem as if such a request would at all transgress Beechmore ideas of the proprieties.

Lindsay's manner throughout had given him the impression that she knew hardly any distinction between men and women—nothing that should in the least degree embarrass her, or prevent her asking a man to dine or call at the farm as readily as she would ask one of her own sex.

Her absolute fearlessness and absence of self-consciousness seemed to be her modesty, and it was impossible to imagine anyone misunderstanding this, and trying to take advantage of it.

She had spoken incidentally of when So-and-So called, or was at tea at the farm, and it might be a man or it might be a woman who was spoken of. Maddie, in her "clicketing," supplied much more evidence of the same kind, showing clearly that the youth and maiden state of the tenants of Beechmore did not at all interfere with the fullest freedom of intercourse with their neighbours.

Also, that whatever a few censorious individuals might have said and thought about them, the majority of the female population of Westholt found nothing in their conduct worthy of serious condemnation, for Maddie was asked "here, there, and everywhere." And even the rector's wife was a frequent partaker of Beechmore hospitality. And this freedom from the usual restraints imposed on women in their position did not seem to strike this stranger with the sense of surprise he would have felt if he had only heard about it. It was Lindsay herself that gained the day over prejudice and custom, partly through the inherent force of her character, her masculine independence, her straightforwardness and singleness of mind; but there was something also about her that defied analysis, or needed a more intimate knowledge of her to arrive at.

But if her conduct appeared, somehow, quite as a matter of course to a stranger there was not much cause for wonderment that it should be accepted by people who had known her and her sister from infancy, and their father before them.

The rain ceased while Maddie prattled, and Julian Colonna started, and rose.

"Miss Madeleine," said he, "I have no longer an excuse for prolonging a very pleasant visit; it is not raining now. Thank you so much for your kindness. I never thought a rainstorm would bring me such good fortune."

"I am glad you think it so," said Maddie, "and I hope you will call again."

"May I? Do you think your sister will let me?"

"Why, she would be only too happy. If you must go let me call her to say good-bye, and she will probably ask you to come herself."

"If she is in the kitchen don't disturb her; I can come out to her."

"I don't think she is in the kitchen. I shall have to look for her," said Maddie, and she ran out of the room.

Colonna turned to the window, and a weary, careworn look came over his face.

Even Maddie, if she had seen him now, would have perceived that he had suffered bitterly.

But he smoothed away the cloud when he heard footsteps without. Lindsay and Maddie came in together.

"I fished her up out of the dairy!" cried the latter, laughing; "she was deep in a colloquy with old Jem over some new kind of fodder. I don't believe, Mr. Colonna, you would understand a word Jem says."

"Certainly not!" he answered, looking down on her, with a strong inclination to pat her sunny head. It was so difficult to remember she was a grown-up young lady.

"You don't even know who Jem is," added Lindsay; "but he is well worth a study. I doubt if any writer but George Eliot could do him justice. So you must go, Maddie tells me"—she held out her hand as she spoke. "I hope you will honour us again, Mr. Colonna, if you should feel inclined!"

"You have given me—a total stranger—so warm a welcome to-day," said Julian, holding the girl's firm, alight hand in his own for a moment, "that it would be singular, indeed, if I were not only too delighted to take you at your word. I hope," smiling—"that you really mean what you say!"

"Eh! I had not said it. We don't count anyone as strangers if they will also be good enough to forget that they are."

"You do not allow them to remember it, Miss Mansfield. Thank you a thousand times for a red-letter day."

"I am glad you found it so," said Lindsay, simply. She let Maddie run down to the gate with him, and went upstairs to put on her riding-habit, that she might ride over to Thornton for Maddie's gloves.

Of course the beauty could talk of nothing else but Julian Colonna; and the flow of her chatter, interrupted by Lindsay's departure for Thornton, was resumed again when the elder girl returned.

Even the charming six-buttoned gloves only diverted for a moment the stream of her eloquence. Lindsay listened indulgently and said little, but she thought more.

CHAPTER IV.

MADDIE was up betimes the next morning, for the picnicers were to meet early at the rectory, from whence they would drive to a romantic spot a few miles off, and there, as an American would say, "camp down."

These picnics were in high favour at Westholt, and though usually under the aegis of Mrs. Dormer, or some other prominent individual, "they were really co-operative;" each person contributing his or her share in kind, to furnish forth ways and means; the conveyances were supplied in the same manner. Lindsay Mansfield possessed no vehicle other than those necessary for farm work. She and Maddie either walked or rode, and a trap was a needless extravagance; but the tenant of Beechmore made a liberal contribution to the commissariat, and no dainties were more thoroughly appreciated than Lindsay Mansfield's.

When Maddie sallied forth at nine o'clock, arrayed in all her finery, she was accompanied by one of the lads, carrying a large, well-filled hamper of such good things as could never be concocted anywhere but in a farm-house. With what tender care Lindsay had presided over the apparelling of her lovely sister. She herself had been asked to the picnic, but had refused. She was too busy, she said; yet she would have enjoyed the "outing" immensely. It was a delicious autumn day, warm and mellow, and there were some very pleasant people going. Duty, however, was Lindsay's watchword, and self-denial so completely a matter of habit that it cost her no

struggle. She had her share of the fun, she would say, laughing, in decking out Maddie; and but for her exquisite taste, Maddie could not, with all her beauty, have made simple materials look so well. Lindsay's knowledge of millinery was not.

She could not make or turn a gown, and she knew nothing of the jargon of the craft which Maddie had at her tongue's end; but she had a quick eye for harmony, and contrast, and her judgment of general effects was faultless. Maddie never considered herself dressed for any occasion on which she wanted to look especially "nice" until she had received Lindsay's imprimatur.

To-day Maddie's gown was white alpaca—not new, but it looked new, and fitted like a glove, and the blue belt matched the blue flowers in her white hat; her only ornament was the little bunch of sweet-smelling white and blue flowers, fastened almost on her left shoulder; but everybody would say how perfectly dressed Maddie Mansfield was.

Maddie's eyes were shining like jewels as she walked down the lane to the rectory. There was never any danger of a party of pleasure being dull to her, and she knew that three or four of her most devoted admirers would be among the company.

Yes, there was Farmer Ingledew! She caught a glimpse of his tall, stalwart form among the trees as she drew near the rectory, and there was the waggonee with the roan mare, as glossy as satin, harnessed to it. It must be very nice, Maddie thought, to have plenty of money; but it was only a passing thought, defied by no feeling of envy. Maddie, with all her faults, was not mercenary or covetous.

Farmer Ingledew saw her the next moment, and came forward to greet her. He was most sprucely got up, and his sunburnt, florid face beamed with open admiration as he took Maddie's little gloved hand in his huge ungloved one.

But somehow Maddie experienced a sense of disappointment in looking upon her adorer to-day.

How utterly different he was from Julian Colonna, with his slender figure, and pale, intellectual countenance. How different the broad speech and loud, hearty voice of the one from the refined accent and sweet-toned voice of the other.

Maddie's manner was a little cool as she asked who else had arrived; and while young Ingledew was enumerating various names she was wondering why on earth he must wear such awfully thick boots.

There were about a dozen people on the lawn, Mrs. Dormer among them, and the young men immediately began to gravitate towards Maddie; while the young ladies, though they all shook hands with her—for she knew them all—looked at her dress, and were inclined to think that Maddie Mansfield owed a good deal to her taste, or Lindsay's, in dress, when in truth the case was *vice versa*.

Maddie knew perfectly well that the girls envied her, and that knowledge formed a great part of her pleasure; yet, to do her justice, she did not try to monopolise male attention—perhaps the serene consciousness of her own power made her magnanimous.

"How many more have to come?" she asked of the curate, who came up to shake hands.

She spoke with one of her sweetest smiles, and one of her most telling upward looks, for the curate was tall—a broad-shouldered, angular borderer.

Maddie had tried hard to subjugate Mr. Johnstone, but without apparent effect. He was a very high churchman, and was reported to belong to a brotherhood which bound him to vows of celibacy.

He looked very ascetic, but he was as full of fun as a schoolboy—the life and soul of picnics or other frolics.

To feminine charms, however, he seemed indifferent; at any rate, Maddie's beauty and arts combined seemed to make no impression upon him.

He liked to talk theology with Lindsay, who shared his views, but then Lindsay never flirted.

She didn't know how to, Maddie would say, with mingled pity and wonder.

Quite unmoved by the smile and the glance, Mr. Johnstone replied that he believed about half-a-dozen more were to come.

"I am so sorry your sister was not able to be with us," he added. "She works too hard!"

"That is what I am always telling her," said Maddie, honestly oblivious of the fact that she might do a great deal to lighten her sister's work if she chose; "but you know what Lindsay is, Mr. Johnstone!"

"Yes," said he, briefly, turning away to speak to a new comer; he thought to himself, "and I know what you are!"

Of course the party was not complete till fully twenty minutes after the time named for the start; but by the time the people were getting into the carriages the last straggler came up, hot and flushed with hurrying, and ere long passengers and cargo were all safely "on board."

"You will come on the box seat with me!" whispered Farmer Ingledew to Maddie.

"If I can!" replied she, coquettishly.

"I will manage it!" was the hasty reply, and the upshot was that Maddie sat beside young Ingledew on the box seat of the waggonee.

"What an abominable flirt that girl is!" said Alice Wytherow to Rose Edgar.

"She's very silly!" returned Rose; "to treat Robert Ingledew as she does most of them; he won't take it, or I am much mistaken. It's a pity Lindsay will not listen to facts; but one mustn't say a word against Maddie."

Very pleasant was the drive through the green lanes, and very pleasant Farmer Ingledew found it, sitting by lovely Maddie on the box-seat, the scent of her flowers coming up to him like sweet wafts of incense; and sometimes her long hair would blow against his shoulder, clinging to his coat, and he had good excuse to take hold of the golden fleece, saying something pretty about it; and Maddie would laugh and blush, and fling all the shining mass over to her other side; where, of course, it would not stay.

The girl was in exuberant spirits, and her tongue ran nineteen to the dozen; but Maddie's high spirits were never boisterous, like those of most of the country girls; she was always a lady, and her abandon had in it no touch of vulgarity.

"Oh! Farmer Ingledew!" said she, suddenly, as the carriages were drawing near the rendezvous. "Do you know what I've seen, or rather, who I've seen?"

"Why, the man that's got Friar's Place, maybe?" replied the young man, smiling; "Mr. Colonna. So have I seen him—at a distance—and he don't seem inclined to be seen any other way."

"Oh; but he is though!" said Maddie, screwing up her lips, and nodding very wisely.

"Have you spoken to him, then?" said Ingledew, rather quickly.

"To be sure I have!" said the beauty; "and I think him awfully nice-looking—well, handsome, and he speaks beautifully—not like Yorkshire people; he's not quite English, you know; he has a rather foreign manner. Oh, Farmer Ingledew!"

A sharp jolt of the rein had made the roan swerve a little to one side; but Ingledew, with a deeper flush on his ruddy cheek, said hurriedly, "she's all right—don't be frightened." Then he added, "you found out a great deal in a short time, Miss Maddie!"

"It wasn't a short time!" said Maddie, innocently; "it was more than three hours." She knew very well that her companion was setting his teeth, and mentally cursing the "foreigner," but that was exactly the effect she meant to produce.

It would never do to say at once and straightforwardly how it was she came to be three hours in Julian Colonna's company, and to talk of him without conveying the impression that he struck her as superior to anybody she had hitherto been acquainted with. There would be no fun

if Robert Ingledew was not made jealous; the coquette must be true to her nature.

"Isn't it pretty, just about here?" she added, directly.

"You've seen it fifty times before!" replied Ingledew, almost rudely.

"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever!" quoted Maddie. "I am afraid I have offended you, Mr. Ingledew. You are not very polite."

"How should you have offended me?" said the young man, with an awkward laugh. "I didn't mean to be rude, but, you see, my manners are Yorkshire."

"Without doubt!" returned the girl, coldly; and not another word was spoken till the carriages pulled up.

Then Farmer Ingledew descended from the box, and as he lifted Maddie to the ground he looked earnestly, imploringly into her face; he had capitulated; and she smiled sweetly, granting him forgiveness.

She would never have given in if he had sulked for days. It was quite contrary to Maddie's doctrines for a woman ever to own herself in the wrong. Even if she be in the wrong, the man must plead for pardon; otherwise men would become intolerable.

And still she had left the thorn ranking. She knew that sooner or later Ingledew would come back to the subject she had so abruptly quitted, and try to find out where and how she had met Mr. Colonna.

But she would not speak first; that would make Ingledew imagine she was sorry for having vexed him, and wanted to let him understand that there was no danger of her thinking too much of the stranger.

As usual, she scattered her favours freely, and took care to be less often with Robert Ingledew than she had been on former occasions. Of course he was angry and jealous; but of this Maddie was serenely unconscious; and when Julian Colonna's name came on the tapis she pretended not to hear, and to be busy talking to some one about another subject, which made the poor blundering fellow believe (as was intended) that she had met this new-comer by chance, and had walked about the country with him—a fact which she would hardly wish to make known to all Westholt.

After luncheon, however, Ingledew contrived to join Maddie, who was a little separated from her companions, with whom she had been engaged in gathering ferns.

"I can show you a place where there are better ferns than these!" said he.

Maddie looked up.

"Can you?" she answered, brightly. "Then please show me."

"This way," said Ingledew, indicating a path that led through a wood, and Maddie tripped away with him.

She chattered gaily as they walked onwards; but Ingledew said little till they reached an open space, where ferns grew in abundance.

"They're beauties, aren't they?" said he, taking out a big clasp knife, and proceeded to cut the feathery fronds.

"Lovely!" said Maddie. "How delighted Lindsay will be with them."

Ingledew made no reply for a moment; after a pause—still stooping over the ferns, he asked—

"Does she like this Colonna too?"

It was an awkward attempt to get at the truth; and a wicked little smile parted Maddie's rosy lips.

"I did not tell you Lindsay had seen him," she said, softly; "but, of course, she did," she added, directly; "because he came to Beechmore; he was caught in the rain, and we asked him in."

"Was that it?" Ingledew lifted himself abruptly. "You might have said so, Miss Maddie," he said, reproachfully.

"Why in the world should I?" exclaimed the girl, opening her eyes on his face in child-like surprise. "You know our ways; there was nothing so very odd in anyone coming to Beechmore, was there?"

"No, not if you had said so," said Ingledew, "but you didn't, and I thought—" He

stopped, looking away, and slashing the ferns with his stick.

Maddie arranged her ferns.

"Well," said she, coolly; "what did you think!"

"I don't mean that I *thought*, but it was just possible—that—that—you might have met him some other way," concluded the poor young man, coming down with a crash.

"No great harm if I had," said Maddie, still intent on her ferns; "one may meet anybody by chance, and it's no one's concern but mine if I liked to talk for a whole day with any agreeable person."

Ingledew's face flushed crimson; a dangerous look flashed into his eyes, which Maddie, her own eyes bent on her ferns, did not notice, and if she had, would not have cared one jot.

"The deuce it isn't," he began, hastily—a slight lift of Maddie's straight brows warned him; he added more calmly, though still a good deal agitated,—"*I* oughtn't to forget myself, I know; but you try me too hard, Miss Maddie; you blow hot and cold; a man never knows where he is with you."

This was getting a little more serious than Maddie had intended.

She cast her eyes around her, but there was no one in sight to create a diversion; she did not want to make Ingledew angry for more than one reason; the rôle of injured innocent was therefore the safest as well as the most effective to play just now.

"I thought you brought me here to find ferns Mr. Ingledew," she said, half haughty, half pouting, "but if it were only to scold me I shall take care how I come away alone with you another time."

She turned away, having made poor Ingledew appear in his own eyes both unfeeling and unfair, and having also cast out a terrible hint for the future; a good deal to enclose in one short speech.

The young man was at her side in a second.

"Miss Maddie," he said, hoarsely, "don't talk to me like that! I won't say another word that'll annoy you, I promise you that faithfully. My hand on it, won't you believe me!"

"Yes," said Maddie, really a little touched, but seeming to be much more so. She smiled and gave him her hand and peace was once more restored between them.

But it was a very hollow peace, and Maddie knew this perfectly well. Ingledew had a vague consciousness of it.

When the girl returned home that evening she only alluded passively to Farmer Ingledew; she was well aware that Lindsay would condemn the conduct of which she had been guilty; for it went far beyond the coquetry which the elder girl (erroneously) believed harmless, if silly.

But no honest and sincere nature could condone deliberate trifling with a man's or a woman's affections; and though Maddie by no means gave so harsh a name herself to her manner of treating young Ingledew she allowed that Lindsay would call it nothing less; and she was not going to be found fault with for nothing, she said to herself.

So she laid her head on her pillow with memories of a very happy day, and a conscience almost at rest—not quite, for there was a cloud, and it had not a silver lining.

CHAPTER V.

THERE was a good deal of Westholt curiosity with regard to Julian Colonna.

When a stranger comes to a place, takes a comfortable house, or if he takes an uncomfortable one and has it put into decent repair—and shows himself disposed to be friendly with his neighbours, there is no reasonable excuse for seeking to pry into his personal history and hazarding all sorts of wild conjectures about him.

His conduct has in it nothing occult or mysterious; and it is only because in the stagnation of country life, people will gossip about anything and everything, that the new dweller in a village

or small town, comporting himself in orthodox fashion, offers food for remark.

But Mr. Colonna, when he came to Westholt, did not comport himself in an orthodox manner.

He began by taking a tumble-down old mansion, two miles and a-half from the village, standing in grounds which long neglect had reduced to a perfect wilderness; and instead of putting the house in repair, and the grounds in order, he left both in their state of ruin, yet evidently means were not lacking—if the possession of a splendid horse and the wearing of good clothes were sure tokens of affluence.

Besides, if the tenant at Friar's Place was a poor man, why did he go out of his way to take an almost uninhabitable house, for which, dilapidated as it was, he must have paid more than for a well-appointed cottage in or near Westholt?

Thirdly, and this was almost to be expected from the two preceding outrages upon accepted canons—the stranger seemed intent on remaining a stranger; he shunned, rather than courted, the attentions of his neighbours; and the neighbours—not unnaturally—wondered who in the world Mr. Colonna was, and why he had taken Friar's Place!

Felton, his sole attendant, was invulnerable. He came into the village occasionally to make purchases; and though he asked questions—being apparently of an inquiring turn of mind—he answered none of a personal tendency, though he had no objection to talk about London and the various foreign places where he and his master had been; being, probably, not displeased to find himself of personal importance among people who considered a journey into the next county going abroad and to whom a continental traveller was a more marvellous being than to a Londoner would appear a man who had discovered how to fly.

Wild were the stories Felton heard of his master, numerous the conjectures; but he contradicted nothing, confirmed nothing; he listened, laughed, and held his peace.

Perhaps if the truth about Julian Colonna had become known it would have grievously disappointed the good people of Westholt; probably his motives for burying himself alive at Friar's Place had their source in circumstances far removed from anything romantic or sensational; but the gossips at Westholt would have scorned to contemplate the commonplace, and wove all manner of melodramatic legends about the life, past, present, and future of the recluse of Friar's Place.

He was not wholly unconscious of these tales, for often Felton would tell him what was said in the village, and he smiled, shrugging his shoulders.

"People living in the country have so little to do," he said, indulgently, "that they must needs meddle with things not concerning them."

"I don't know about little to do, sir," Felton remarked, on one such occasion, speaking with the freedom of an old and faithful servant; "there seems plenty to do here—the people are busy enough; but I suppose their work don't give them much to think about, for they do gossip awful. Talk of country people, sir, why it's all nonsense what the poetry books have about villages and shepherds, and that sort. I've never heard so much scandal and gossip in one while as I've heard in this place; I don't want any more villages, sir, and I don't much like these people, neither."

Felton, it will be seen, had had very little experience of rural life, except as a bird of passage, when the darker features of provincial existence do not present themselves.

Julian Colonna smiled again.

"I am afraid," he said, "that I could not myself, long endure a life in the country, but there is so much in habit. As for these people, they are unlike any you have met before, and certainly rough and uncouth; but don't judge them—you will think better of them presently!"

"Maybe I shall, sir," said Felton, dubiously. He had been among South and West countrymen and Continentals and Asiatics, but Yorkshiremen were a species of the genus *homo* he had never yet encountered, and did not take to.

The labouring people he could not understand, and was often not a little puzzled to comprehend

people in a higher grade; and altogether he seemed disposed to regard Yorkshiremen as a race more alien to him and his master than Frenchmen or Germans.

One morning, after a visit to the village, he came into Mr. Colonna's presence with a couple of magazines, which, after some difficulty, he had succeeded in obtaining.

"The woman had just a few magazines," he explained, "which the rector and a few others hire, and then she sells them to some lady. Regular hole I call the place—you can't get anything."

Colonna smiled.

"Well," he said, "maybe we shall not remain here long."

"I hope not, sir! Why, if you were for going among people, there's nobody worth the visiting, I'm thinking, so rough they are, except those ladies at Beechmore, and they're not Yorkshire, you see, sir!"

"Why, Felton, what do you know of them?"

"I've heard about them, sir, and this morning I see the pair of 'em, and heard 'em speak. She's a rare beauty, that young one, sir—a rare beauty!"

He said this so significantly that his master looked at him and smiled again.

"Felton," said he, coolly, "she is eighteen, and I am forty!"

"And you look thirty, sir!" said Felton, stoutly, though he coloured. "Lord, sir! what's twenty-two years merely by the calendar?"

"Not much, certainly; but there may be thirty-two, in fact!"

"Ten years on to your age, sir, or off here!"

"Whichever way you please, Felton! No! no!" He rose up, and a look of deep pain crossed his face. "I have cast into the lottery and drawn a blank! I shall not make another cast in a hurry!"

He took up one of the magazines, and Felton accepted the hint and withdrew.

Colonna looked round the room, a sort of half-study, half-library, facing the front of the house; a handsome room, oak-paneled, and well furnished in a ponderous old-fashioned style; but even the bright fire that burned on the great stone hearth could not make it look comfortable.

It was dreary and unhomelike. The keeping-room at Beechmore was far more home-like; but women can make a home, Colonna argued, men cannot.

He sighed, and turned to his magazine, and Maddie might not have been best pleased had she known that her golden hair and blue eyes never came between him and the page.

He had lighted on a love tale, a rather silly one. Yet he read for ten minutes before it struck him that the story was not worth reading, and then he threw down the magazine, vexed with himself that "such trash" could interest him for so long.

The day was fine and sunny, though rather cold.

He took up his hat and went out. Lindsay and her sister had asked him to call again. Why should he not go to tea this evening? But as he walked onwards towards Westholt he hesitated. He had visited no one else. Would not his making a distinction in favour of Beechmore be misconstrued, and subject the girls to unpleasant gossip?

That question was easily settled. He would call on other people. He did not care for them, but he would put up with boredom for the sake of going to Beechmore.

A sudden turn in the road brought him in full view of a figure going on before him, a little light figure, with floating yellow hair.

The figure turned its head, saw him and ran back to him with outstretched hands.

"Mr. Colonna!" cried Maddie, joyously.

"How jolly to meet you!"

"I quite reciprocate the sentiment, Miss Madeleine. Are you homeward bound?"

"To be sure; and you?"

"Well, I was going to take advantage of your sister's and your own kind invitation to Beechmore, if quite convenient."

"Of course it is quite convenient, and awfully nice; only there will be nobody but us two, so

far as I know," said Maddie, looking as if she thought this very poor company for the guest.

"I don't ask any more, Miss Madeleine," said he, looking into her blue eyes, and thinking what an arch coquette she was.

Thus employed—not altogether disagreeably, perhaps—he did not observe an approaching horseman (though Maddie did) until he was quite close, and then he looked up to see a tall, ruddy young man, apparently of the yeoman class, looking angrily at Maddie, while the girl nodded and smiled at him. He gave no response to nod or smile, but jerked the rein and rode quickly onwards.

Maddie glanced after him and laughed.

Colonna said lightly,—

"Is that one of your many admirers, Miss Madeleine?"

"Yes," said she, carelessly; "silly fellow! I rather like Bob Ingledew, but he is not a gentleman, you know."

"I daresay you flirt with him a little bit, though."

"Indeed I don't!" cried Maddie. "One can't speak to some of these people but they think you are in love with them."

She was inwardly delighted that Farmer Ingledew should have seen her with Julian Colonna; nor did the latter's last question at all offend her; it seemed to her to indicate some anxiety as to the relations between her and Ingledew. With more wit and less vanity she might have perceived that Colonna spoke quite indifferently, and would hardly have made such a remark to anyone less childlike than Maddie.

But already the foolish little beauty was beginning to believe herself "in love" with Julian Colonna, and was determined to practice on him the arts she had never yet found to fail.

She tripped along chirruping in her birdlike fashion, and when they reached Beechmore she ran on before, and joyously announced him to Lindsay, who had just come in from the parlour, whither she had carried the tea-kettle.

"He is welcome," said Lindsay, turning and holding out her hand. How different was the touch of her hand from Madeleine's—so strong and firm, yet soft, returning the clasp given, while Maddie just let her hand lie in a man's fingers or clung to them—when she chose—but never gave a friendly clasp. You would not expect that from her if you only saw her hand, while all the rest of her was hidden; it was beautiful in shape, but it had no character.

They went in to tea. How cosy the room looked with the curtains drawn, the cheerful fire in the grate, the great mastiff stretched on the rug, and the pretty china on the table!

It was a very happy evening. Maddie was in exuberant spirits, and chattered so much that Lindsay was perforce rather silent; but whenever Lindsay did speak she spoke well, of books, music—many things that lay beyond Maddie's ken.

She did not like this; nor did she like Lindsay to sing German songs.

She was pleased when Lindsay was summoned by Elsie to see a neighbouring farmer about some agricultural business, and was away half an hour; but Colonna looked up from the book Maddie was showing him—her golden head very close to his—when the elder sister came in, watched her as she crossed the floor, and would have made room for her beside him had that been possible; Maddie had the only vacancy. Lindsay sat down near the fire.

"I was telling Miss Maddie," said Colonna—he had never used the abbreviation before—"that I could not get magazines here, and she was so good as to offer to lend me some that you have."

"With the greatest pleasure!" said Lindsay. "You are welcome to borrow any of our books. We have not a very large assortment, unhappily!"

"You are too kind. Now, Miss Maddie, you promised me a song!"

Maddie pouted charmingly.

"You won't care for my songs, Mr. Colonna. I can't sing German."

"You have some pretty English songs," interrupted Lindsay.

"You must play the accompaniment, then, Lindsay."

Nothing could be done without Lindsay, it seemed.

Maddie sang some love ballads, sung in young lady fashion. Julian Colonna hardly noticed words or melody, but he thanked the lovely singer, and said the song was pretty, and by this it was time to go, for he would not, of course, stop late.

Maddie went down to the gate with him, and he stopped for a minute or two talking to her, and held her hand in his longer than is usual when he said good-bye, for she had made some remark just then, and he had scarcely noticed that her hand was in his.

"The air is rather frosty," he said, smiling. "Wrap your shawl about you, there's a good girl," and he drew the crimson fold around her with what seemed to her a tender touch—perhaps it was.

Maddie's heart beat fast, she gave a little shy laugh, and said that she was "all right, Lindsay always fancied she was made of blown glass."

"Lindsay makes a great pet of you!" he said.

He smiled in the bonnie face, looked past her over her head to the garden path, where no figure appeared, and went on.

Maddie stood looking after him till he was lost to sight, and was then turning back towards the house, when a black shadow fell across the moonlight, and a heavy hand was laid on hers.

"Don't scream," said Robert Ingledew's voice, and she glanced up half fearfully into his face, convulsed with rage. "I am not going to hurt you, but what do you do letting that foreigner make love to you?"

"He hasn't made love to me," she said, flushing crimson. "How dare you say so?"

"Didn't I see you with him to-day? Didn't I see him holding your hand just now?"

"So you have played the spy, have you? It was quite by chance I met him to-day, and if he does make love to me, he is free, and so am I."

"You are not free, you are playing fast-and-loose with me, girl—"

"Maddie!" called Lindsay's clear voice, "Come in; it is too cold for you to be out."

Maddie caught at the reprieve.

"Robert, let go my hand," she said, "Lindsay is calling."

Ingledew flung her hand almost roughly from him, and with an oath strode away.

Maddie rushed into the house, threw herself into a chair, and burst out crying.

Lindsay stood looking at her till she had wept for three or four minutes, then she said quietly,—

"What is the matter, Maddie? What are you crying for?"

Then it all came out—with sobs, and sighs, and blushes—how Farmer Ingledew had seen her with Mr. Colonna on the road, and had "looked furious;" how Mr. Colonna had put her shawl round her at the gate, and held her hand "quite a minute," and called her "a good girl," (and he called her "Miss Maddie," too, to-night; had Lindsay noticed that—not Miss Madeleine—he always said Madeleine, not Madeline), and Robert Ingledew had seen them at the gate, and was "awfully angry and jealous, and said Mr. Colonna was making love to her; and what right had Robert to interfere!"

Lindsay's brow darkened as she listened; it was all very silly and trivial—Maddie's notion of love was not hers.

She thought if anyone ever showed her tokens of love she would not talk about it, and item looks and touches as a tradesman tallies up his gains; and, after all, it might be only Maddie's fancy, she was always imagining herself in love, and telling Lindsay about passages similar to those of this evening.

Still, it would be nothing strange that Julian Colonna should be captivated by Maddie's beauty—all other men were, and a grave intellectual man, past his youth, is no more exempt from such captivity than a silly youth of twenty.

Whether Maddie could really be a companion to such a man was another question, but that was his business, Lindsay said to herself, not hers.

"I daresay," she said to Maddie, "that you have flirted far too much with Robert Ingledew."

"I haven't, indeed, Lindsay!"

"I can't quite believe you, Maddie. You fancy Robert is like the rest, but he isn't; he is a man who will take things to heart. As to Mr. Colonna, I don't know; you shouldn't let your head run on such ideas, and you shouldn't talk about them so much."

"Not to you, Lindsay!" said Maddie, laying her sunny head on Lindsay's shoulder.

"It's the way you talk, dear, that vexes me," said Lindsay, more softly. "Things like that should be sacred; you treat them so lightly, as if it were great fun, as you call it, to love any one, any man, I mean."

"So it is," said Maddie, promptly; "but you can't know—you've never been in love, poor Lindsay."

"Rich Lindsay, rather," said she. "I don't want to be, in your fashion, or any other, for that matter. Now go to bed and don't talk nonsense."

And Maddie went to bed and dreamed about Julian Colonna, or persuaded herself that she did; but Lindsay sat up later, reading, but some times her attention wandered, and she fell to thinking over the events of the evening.

Certainly Mr. Colonna had noticed Maddie a good deal, but as certainly Maddie had not given him the chance to neglect her.

In one respect Lindsay had no cause for anxiety; whatever happened, Maddie would not suffer, much; the man was not born for whom the beauty would break her heart.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. COLONNA called on the rector and on one or two other people, and was received with open arms; he also accepted two or three invitations, and twice met Maddie and took her home.

It was not late the first time, and Lindsay came down to the gate, and he stood talking a few minutes with both girls; but the second time it was midnight, so he could only leave Maddie at the door; but, of course, Lindsay opened it, and just for a minute they were alone, for Maddie had run in for a book she had promised to lend Mr. Colonna.

"Isn't it a splendid night!" said Lindsay, looking up at the starlit sky. "We shall have snow soon, Mr. Colonna."

"Yes," he said rather vaguely, for he was not looking at the sky but at her face.

"Yes to which proposition?" said Lindsay, laughing, and bringing her eyes down to earth again.

"I beg your pardon—to the first, I believe."

"The snow falls so early here," said Lindsay. "I could well dispense with it altogether; it is so cold for Maddie, too."

"How fond you are of Maddie! Your whole soul seems wrapped up in her."

"Not my whole soul," said Lindsay, smiling.

"Who has the rest?" said he, smiling also.

"No one. She is the only relation I have; here she comes!"

Maddie ran up with the book.

"It's Lindsay's," she said, "but I knew she wouldn't mind."

"I was promised any book I liked," said Julian. "Is this book a favourite, Miss Mansfield?"

"Rossetti! Yes, indeed!"

"Fancy prosaic Lindsay reading sonnets!" cried Maddie, gaily.

"She is not prosaic—not in the least," said Colonna, directly. "Good-night, Maddie." He held out his hand to her; then to Lindsay.

"Good-night," he said; there was the faintest indication of a pause, as if he would have closed the sentence with a name, but abrak from "Miss Mansfield" as stiff, and did not like to say "Lindsay." But he did not add any more; he lifted his hat, and went away.

"How funny of him," said Maddie, afterwards, "to shake hands with me first, wasn't it?"

prepared to await events. The postern was gently opened, the key withdrawn, and someone entered, with the utmost caution, the door then closed again, and the intruder stole softly along the passage, a faint rustle of silken skirts marking her progress, and giving evidence of her sex.

Her terror, when Clem stepped out, and seized her arm, must have been intense. She uttered a quick, half-stifled cry, that was almost a moan of pain—for Clem's grip was by no means gentle, and her fingers left marks that were visible in black bruises for weeks afterwards.

Without a word, she dragged her prisoner into the study, and, never once relaxing her grasp, proceeded to light a candle.

To her horror, in the little, white faced, shrinking captive, she beheld her sister Minna.

Yes, Minna dressed in a long dark ulster, a felt hat, and with a pair of goloshes on her feet—so splashed with mud, that it was evident they must have walked a pretty considerable distance, Minna, half dead with terror and fatigue, with swollen eyelids telling of recent tears, and quivering lips—a pitiful spectacle indeed!

There was a little pause. Clem broke it harshly.

"Where have you been?" Minna did not answer—did not even so much as raise her eyes from their miserable contemplation of the carpet.

"Where have you been?" repeated Clem, and she shook her violently. "What do you mean by leaving the house in the middle of the night, and stealing in like a thief. Are you aware what people would say if they knew of your conduct? Do you know the kind of suspicions you lay yourself open to? Speak! At least you have enough sense to understand that you won't gain anything by concealment."

"Oh, Clem, don't speak to me in that tone. I can't bear it, indeed I can't!" sobbed Minna, half hysterically, and wrenching herself free, she sank down on the couch, and hid her face in her hands—watched for a few minutes, in grim silence by her sister, whose sharp eyes travelled from the top of her rain-drenched felt hat, to the soles of her muddy boots.

"It strikes me you'll have to bear something a good deal worse than my questions," Clem said at last, in a hard, dry voice, marching to the door, and securing it. Then she came back again. "You don't leave this room till you have told me where you have been."

"Then I shan't leave it till Doomsday!" exclaimed Minna, with a sudden flash of spirit, and raising her head as she spoke. "I know I've done an unconventional thing, and perhaps a stupid one, but my conscience is clear of any wickedness, and you may rave at me as much as you like, but I shall keep my own counsel."

"You deceitful, unprincipled girl, how dare you talk to me in this way!" cried Clem, half beside herself with rage. "You have made an assignation with some lover—that's what you have done, and it's with a view of shielding him that you take such a tone. But you needn't think you'll get the better of me after this fashion. As it happens, I know something more of the matter than you give me credit for. I know that the man was prowling about the garden this evening, and that he's been in the habit of coming to meet you regularly, and more than that, I shall carry my knowledge straight to Rafe, and let him sift the affair to the bottom—and he's not the man to be easily fooled as you ought to be aware by this time!"

It was a mere idle threat which Clem would have out her tongue off rather than put into execution, but Minna was too distraught to see this, and in her terror she threw herself on her knees, her little white hands clutching frantically at Clem's dressing gown.

"Clem, dear Clem, have pity on me, and promise not to do this! I am innocent of even an evil intention. I give you my word, I am. Circumstances are against me, I acknowledge, and yet I have done nothing of which the angels in Heaven might be ashamed. But you must not breathe a word to Rafe. I know what he is as well as you do, and he's not the man to let the matter rest—he would probe it to its foundation, as you say, and that would mean ruin—ruin for all of us. Say you'll keep silence—say you'll not

let a soul suspect what has happened, and I'll bless you all my life. I'll do anything and everything you wish. There! I swear it!"

The pretty, coquettish little creature was absolutely transformed. Real anguish rang in her voice, real misery looked through her blue eyes, and yet her whole demeanour was instinct with a certain firmness that was the last quality for which her sister had been inclined to give her credit. There could be no doubt that she was very unhappy, but there could also be no doubt that her character had strengthened wonderfully under stress of circumstances whose nature Clem could not even guess.

She remained looking at her for a few minutes, then she raised her from the ground and placed her on the couch again.

"Listen to me, Minna, and try and believe that every word I speak is dictated by the thought of your welfare. You have, on your own confession, done a very foolish thing; and, if the world knew of it, it might apply some harder word to your conduct. But the world shall not know, and I will give you the promise you require, not to divulge it to a single creature—if you will take me into your confidence. Mind, I don't ask out of vulgar curiosity, but because I have your interest at heart. What has happened in the past I can't help—it is over and done with, but the future I may control in a great measure, if you will be open with me. Surely it is not much to ask!"

"No," said Minna, catching her breath sharply; "it is not much, perhaps, and yet it is more than I dare tell you. My lips are sealed, and nothing that you can do or say will induce me to break my vow of secrecy. Perhaps sometime you will learn everything, and then you will say I have done right in keeping silence. Oh, Clem, don't torture me any more; can't you see that I am just worn out—exhausted in mind and body, and fit for nothing but to wish that I was dead and buried at rest!"

There was no affection in this outburst, it described very fairly the poor child's condition.

Puzzled and angry as she was, Clem had not lost the common sense that was her distinguishing characteristic, so without making further efforts—she recognised they would be useless—she hustled Minna off to bed, determining to puzzle out the mystery for herself later on.

The next morning Minna was not well enough to get up; she was feverish, her pulse was intermittent, and it was clear she had caught a severe chill which might keep her in bed for some days.

Clem sent for the doctor, who prescribed rest and warmth, but seemed puzzled by certain symptoms of his patient, which he could not diagnose.

In the meantime Clementina was as good as her word, and had a thorough "turn out," as she called it, of the west gallery. She discovered nothing that threw any light on the ghost story, but by her trenchant scorn and ironical questions she succeeded in making some of the servants very considerably ashamed of their former fears, and put an end to the stampede of terror with which she had been threatened the day before.

This was satisfactory, so far as it went, but it did not touch the main cause of her unhappiness—namely, the relations existing between Rafe and Miss Gilmour.

At luncheon Lady Sue said something which had an indirect bearing on the point, and which supplied Clem with an idea—a valuable one, as it turned out.

Her little ladyship had been devoting herself as usual to the *Morning Post*, whose contents she had pretty thoroughly mastered.

Turning to her companion, she said,—

"There is a friend of yours in this neighbourhood, Miss Gilmour."

"Indeed!" returned Miss Gilmour, looking more startled than pleased.

"Lady Du Vernet. She is staying with the Manvers, at Manvers Royal. It is within an easy drive. Wouldn't you like to go and see her?"

Miss Gilmour trifled with her bread, and kept her eyes fixed on the tablecloth.

"I think not, thank you."

Lady Sue seemed disappointed. Perhaps she wanted an excuse for the drive herself.

"Who is Lady Du Vernet, may I ask?" inquired Clementina, suavely, addressing her aunt.

"The lady Miss Gilmour gave me as reference when I engaged her. She wrote me the sweetest letter imaginable in reply to mine, and from it I gathered that she and Miss Gilmour must be great friends. I quite thought you would be delighted at the opportunity of renewing your acquaintance," added Lady Sue with some asperity to her companion.

Miss Gilmour made no reply, and Clem decided she was ill at ease.

Was it possible she feared Lady Du Vernet's proximity, because the latter knew more about her history than she cared to have made public?

It was only a suspicion of Clem's, but she decided to put it to the proof without delay!

CHAPTER XII.

WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN.

It was not often Clem indulged in the luxury of a drive; but she made her journey to Manvers Royal in the barouch that afternoon, and as she leaned back against the cushions she could not help thinking what a wrench it would be to give up all her privileges as mistress of Westwood, and see Ursula Gilmour enjoying them in her stead!

Lady Du Vernet was at home, and looked a little surprised as her visitor was announced.

She was a small, fair, fragile woman with blue eyes, and a mouth betokening a considerable amount of firmness.

Clem, who was not given to beating about the bush, lost no time in announcing the object of her visit.

"You wish to speak to me about Miss Gilmour?" Lady Du Vernet said, with a puzzled air. "I am afraid I don't quite understand."

Clementina had the grace to blush. She was aware her errand was not a very dignified one, and she by no means relished it. Nevertheless she went on with her explanation.

"My aunt, Lady Susan Ferrers, has a companion, named Ursula Gilmour, whom she engaged some three months ago, on your recommendation. Since then circumstances have happened which make me anxious to know something concerning her former life, and I thought you would not mind telling me who her father and mother were, and where she was before she came to Lady Susan."

The smile deepened on Lady Du Vernet's lips. She seemed much amused.

"I should not mind telling you in the least, if I knew! But I cannot give you information on a subject of which I myself am in complete ignorance."

"Then how came you to be acquainted with Miss Gilmour?"

"That is just the point—I am not acquainted with her."

Clementina nearly jumped from her chair; she controlled herself with an effort.

"But you answered Lady Susan's letter!"

The other shook her head.

"You are mistaken, Miss Ferrers, I never had a letter from Lady Susan in my life."

Clem was thoroughly mystified, still she was determined to make assurance doubly sure.

"You are Lady Du Vernet, of Fairlawn, Worcestershire?"

"I am."

"And my aunt wrote to you in July or August last?"

"If she wrote I did not receive the letter."

"But it was answered."

"Impossible! Why I was in town till the end of July, and I went to Scotland in August. Since then I have been paying a round of visits, and as a matter-of-fact have not been near Fairlawn since last May. There is evidently some mistake."

Evidently there was. Clem sat bewilderedly gazing out of the window on the park, where long-antlered deer were moving under the shadow of the trees.

The silence that ensued was so long that Lady Du Vernet, growing weary, broke it. "Is there any other way in which I can help you, Miss Ferrers? If not—"

Thus recalled to her senses, Clem got up and took leave; but before quitting the room she ventured one more question.

"I may take it then, Lady Du Vernet, that you do not know Miss Gilmour, and that the letter my aunt received, purporting to be from you, was a forgery?"

"Certainly. And I shall be very glad to have the letter you refer to in order that I may take steps to ascertain by whom the forgery was committed."

Clementina went home triumphant. Her suspicions regarding Ursula were true—she was an impostor, whose time for being unmasked had come, and she would be driven forth with ignominy from the house where she had schemed to rule as mistress! Clem clapped her hands together in victorious glee, and then came the question as to whom she should go with her knowledge. Not to Lady Sue, certainly, for she was so contradictory, that if she found her companion accused by someone else, she might take her part out of pure perversity. Rafe! Well, no, for he would not regard with any great amount of consideration the person who tried to rob him of his love. Thus there remained only Ursula herself, and though Clem quailed a little as she thought of the girl's scornful eyes, she made up her mind that she must confront them. What would she do, she wondered, when thus brought to bay?

No opportunity for speaking to her alone occurred that evening, but the next morning Lady Sue chose to go out for a walk with Ruth, and as soon as they were well clear of the house, Clem went straight to Miss Gilmour's room, where she found the young girl standing in a thoughtful attitude in front of the window.

She started slightly as she saw her visitor—or Clem fancied she did, but she placed a chair, and waited for her to speak, with her usual air of quiet dignity—an air to which Clem had a decided objection, more strongly marked than usual on this occasion!

"Miss Gilmour, I went to see Lady Du Vernet, yesterday, and we had a conversation about you."

There could be no doubt this time of the start Ursula gave. Her face paled, her eyes grew wide and questioning.

"I daresay you will guess what I am going to tell you," Clem went on, remorselessly. "Of course Lady Du Vernet professed entire ignorance of you, and as to the letter my aunt was supposed to have received from her—it was a forgery!"

Miss Gilmour looked straight before, into infinite distance, as it would seem, but she made no comment.

"Have you no excuse to urge, no explanation to offer?" went on Clem, impatiently. "Your conduct, on the face of it, looks bad enough, but I am willing to listen to anything you may wish to say."

She was more than willing—she was anxious, for on Miss Gilmour's reception of her news depended her own future line of conduct. Moreover, she hoped to augment her scanty knowledge of the facts by a full confession on the part of the delinquent.

The girl turned round very slowly and looked at her. Pale as she was, there was no sign of weakness or flinching about her—her great dark eyes still flashed contemptuous defiance.

"What would you have me say? Do you wish me to tell you you have made a mistake?"

"No, for I should not believe you if you did. Besides, it would be very easy to put it to the proof. Lady Du Vernet is still staying at Manvers Royal, and is quite willing to see my aunt, Lady Susan, and repeat to her the information she has already given me. If you desire to be included in the interview, I have no doubt Lady Susan would take you with her."

Clem could not help the triumph she felt, showing itself in her voice. At last this girl, whom she had always disliked, was in her power.

"What made you go over to Manvers Royal?" demanded Ursula, abruptly.

Clem hesitated a moment, then boldly came out with the truth.

"I went because I doubted the story you told Lady Sue, and I wished to make quite sure. All along I have had suspicions about you, and now I find they are amply justified."

The two women still faced each other—the one tall, thin, angular, middle-aged, her bony hands restless with excitement, her eyes a-glitter with eager victory; the other, young, beautiful, silent, and contemptuous, like some strong and splendid creature of the woods, who finds itself trapped, and yet in its impotence has nothing but scorn for the means adopted for its capture.

"If you will take my advice you will lose no time in leaving Westwood," added Clem, lowering her eyes with angry shamedness, and deeply resentful of the girl's demeanour. "I have no wish to humiliate you publicly, but I should not be doing my duty if I permitted you to stay any longer. You can make some excuse to Lady Sue—your mother's illness, or something of that kind, you know."

Ursula smiled bitterly.

"It would be a lie, but I suppose you think one falsehood more or less does not matter!"

"Well, judging from appearances, I should think your conscience cannot be particularly tender on the point," rejoined Clem, bluntly. "However, that is your own concern. It really does not make much difference to me what you say, so long as you go."

"I understand. You want to get rid of me. Beyond that you do not care. Well, Miss Ferrers, and suppose I refuse to go?"

"You would not dare!" breathed Clem, involuntarily, taking a step forward, and clenching her hand tight. Then she fell back and laughed. "The decision does not rest with you, Miss Gilmour."

"With whom then?"

"With Lady Sue."

"And no one else!" queried Miss Gilmour, in a curiously significant tone. "What about Mr. Ferrers—the Squire?"

Evidently she had a motive in mentioning his name, for she watched Clem keenly, and saw at once the added hostility that came in her face.

"You would not dare go to him!"

Ursula laughed softly.

"Don't be too sure of that. Women, when they are reckless, dare a good deal, remember, and according to you I have nothing to lose, everything to gain."

Clem breathed hard. She knew how weak men are under the spell of beauty, and she did not give Rafe credit for more powers of resistance than those possessed by the majority of his sex. Suppose this girl carried her threat into execution, and Rafe, in his foolish infatuation, refused to let her go!

Suddenly she bethought herself of another card she held in her hand. It might prove to be a trump—or might not! Anyhow, she would try it.

"If you are unwise enough to defy me, you must take the consequences. I have given you every chance of leaving Westwood, but if you refuse, you must be driven out. I shall wire up to Captain Lequeux, and he will tell Rafe all he knows concerning your past life. He spared you once, but a second time he would be less merciful."

The shot told. Ursula put out her hand to steady herself against the back of a chair, and her face—pale enough before—grew sickly white.

"How do you know about Lequeux—who told you?" she murmured, hoarsely, hardly able to articulate the words, so great was her agitation.

"That I am not at liberty to divulge, but I may tell you that I know quite enough to make it impossible for you to remain here. And more than that, I insist upon your leaving! If you go quietly, so much the better, a scandal will be avoided, and I shall hold my tongue. But if you refuse, then I warn you you need expect no mercy from me. I shall openly publish all I know—do you understand, all!"

Ursula's head sunk on her folded arms, which

she had laid on the back of the chair, her whole attitude betokening abandonment.

Clem watched her for a few minutes in grim silence, her thin lips hardening into a straight line. It had been a tough battle, and so far she had triumphed. But the final victory was not even yet decided—it hung by a hair, so to speak.

"Leave me," Ursula entreated, at last, without raising her head. "I must be alone to think over what you have said."

"Very well, and you can give me your answer at lunch time."

Clem went from the room, closing the door behind her. She paused for a moment outside, debating certain points with a swiftness that was characteristic of her mental processes, then she went down to the study, and insisted on Rafe going over accounts with her—taking no notice of his prayer for a respite. It would never do to let Miss Gilmour have a chance of seeing him alone, and if Clem could help it, she shouldn't either!

(To be continued.)

JULIAN COLONNA.

—101—

(Continued from page 153.)

CHAPTER VII.

It was growing dark, and Lindsay had changed her dress and come down to the parlour, intending to read till Maddie returned home.

The snow had ceased falling about twelve o'clock, and Miss Maddie had gone over to Mrs. Edgar's; she did not mind snow or frost when her own pleasure was in question.

Lindsay found it very dull, sitting here alone, and fell to moodily wishing that she could travel about; she was getting sick of this routine life. She would be heartily glad when Maddie came back, and perhaps Mr. Colonna would remain to tea, and the evening would pass pleasantly.

The click of the garden gate made her look up—to see Julian Colonna, not walking with Maddie, but carrying her in his arms, and Maddie seemed wholly or partially insensible.

Lindsay was through the door and out on the path in a second, but not hurried or excited in manner, whatever she felt.

"What has happened?" she said, quickly. "Is Maddie ill?"

"Not ill," he said. "She has twisted her foot a little—nothing worse!"

"Thank Heaven!" said Lindsay, and went on before him into the house.

Maddie was laid gently on a sofa, and opened her eyes with a faint smile, but a sharp pang of pain made her cry out.

"Does it hurt you much, poor child?" said Colonna, kindly. Lindsay was tenderly removing boot and stocking.

"Oh, so much!"

The blue eyes were full of tears.

"It's not a bad sprain," said Lindsay, "though the ankle is a good deal swollen. How did it happen?"

"She slipped on the snow, not fifty yards from this door," said Colonna. "She had not my arm at the minute, or it could not have happened."

Maddie glanced up at him shyly; but he was looking at Lindsay.

"You must come up to bed, Maddie," said the latter, "to be properly attended to."

Maddie did not mind, for Mr. Colonna had told her he could not stay this evening; besides, she liked to have him carry her upstairs, where he left her with Lindsay, and went back to the parlour.

Maddie lay half smiling, despite the pain, which was probably not so great now that only her sister was with her; and when Lindsay had bound up the ankle and tucked Maddie in the younger girl whispered,—

"I want to tell you something, Lindsay!"

"Presently, chick! I must go down to Mr

had been prepared for and was awaiting them in the library.

Isobel Falconer and the Salisbury doctor went away together—for indeed they needed something—but Ivy herself had refused to stir from her husband's bedside. They could send some tea to her there.

And so she was alone in the room with Ronald Dundas. Upon the carved oaken chest at the bed-foot lay the clothes which the surgeon had ripped from Ronald's body, since it had been possible to get them off in no other way.

One by one Ivy carried the garments to the light, and one by one she looked at them closely.

They were worn, travel-soiled, undeniably shabby. They might once, it is true, have been spotless, and of fashionable make—Ronald Dundas had always loved goodly apparel—but, alas! as Ivy saw, they were shabby enough now! At a glance she perceived that the boots matched the clothes, every pocket of which was empty—at least she could find no money in any of them.

"Oh, my poor Ronald!" she whispered heart-brokenly. "My love—my love!"

Not until the morning was well advanced, and a pale sun was high in a breezy sky, a sun that dried but tardily the bare, wet, chocolate-tinted tree-tops and the sodden brown paths beneath them, did Ronald Dundas give utterance to any word that was to the watchers in the least intelligible.

Even then it was hard to understand him—difficult to follow the drift and the meaning of this muttered rambling talk of his.

He lay upon his back, high amongst the pillows—a ghastly, tortured look on his white face, a bandage hiding the gash upon his dark head; but his eyes were still closed.

He seemed, so far as they could comprehend him, to be living over again some scene or other of devilry in Paris, with his friend Count Ravenna. Drink and play, wine and women, cards and dice, money lost and money won—in disjointed, fragmentary sentences, as they watched and tended him, they caught these muttered words amid the rest.

He cursed his ill-luck—ah, was not it ever so! When money was gone friends likewise disappeared. He cursed those false friends, Count Ravenna more than all. And then he went on to ramble about his quitting the Continent well-nigh penniless—his return to London, and of the various hardships he had endured in the great, cruel, selfish city during the past two months or more.

"He's speaking of his grandfather," said Isobel Falconer, anxiously, a little later. "Listen!"

Yes, he was muttering now that, like the prodigal son, he would return to the old home, to Huntingtower—not, however, prodigal-wise, to confess humbly that he had sinned and had repented; but to own passionately that in exile he had suffered and was wretched, that he wanted to end his miserable banishment.

If it were really a question of forgiveness, then in mercy let him be forgiven and have done with it; forgiveness in any manner that Sir Roderick, his grandfather, pleased. Only let him be pardoned without delay. For the present he asked no more!

He fell to wondering how he might be received, should he resolve to go thither to Huntingtower; whether the doors of the old place would be closed against him; and whether Sir Roderick, his wrath unquenched, would sternly refuse to see him.

Perhaps; it was more likely than not, remembering how they parted.

An idea came to him—an inspiration. He would act upon it.

Once let him gain admittance to his grandfather's presence; let him only come upon the old man suddenly and without warning; and the rest, he believed, would be sufficiently easy—his object, in fact, would be attained. If this were done, and his grandfather, Sir Roderick, taken unawares, there would then be no time for the old anger, or the smouldering ashes of it, to flare up again into fierce life—no time, as it were, for

the old bitter quarrel to be remembered, gone over once more in all its galling actualities, its shameful details.

But this, thought he, would inevitably be the case if he, Ronald Dundas, were foolish enough to announce his coming, in any manner, previously—to prepare Sir Roderick beforehand, either by letter or by the mouth of a servant, for his daring reappearance at the home of his boyhood.

No. Sir Roderick and himself, Ronald had decided, should come face to face when such an encounter was undreamed-of and least expected by the obstinate old baronet. If he was to win in the bold adventure, this, he told himself, was the only way to do it and succeed. Of course he was ignorant of the pitiable state of senility to which the past few years had reduced Sir Roderick Dundas. The extreme physical infirmity, the mental havoc of the aged baronet, were alike unknown to his grandson Ronald.

So he determined that, like a thief in the night, he would steal his way into Huntingtower; and for Ronald Dundas to do this would be no extraordinary feat—had not he, indeed, as a younger man, done the same thing scores of times before!—and then in the morning, when he guessed the coast to be clear, he would seek Sir Roderick's presence, and make the desperate stroke.

The lower windows of the mansion, he well knew, were at night kept heavily barred and shuttered; yet there was neither shutter nor bar to the lofty casement of the well-remembered chamber upon the second floor which had once upon a time been his own—his own old favourite room, spacious and comfortable, which overlooked the terrace and the forsaken pleasure-grounds. Upward to that window, as he had so often and so fearlessly done in his hot wild youth, by the aid of the iron trellis and the tough ancient ivy-limbs, would he once more climb resolutely and—

Here the indistinct, rambling, fevered talk broke off; and, meaning, he moved his head restlessly from side to side upon the pillows. All at once he cried out—weak as he was, it was almost a shout—

"Why is she—Ivy—here at Huntingtower? In Heaven's name how did she get here? I saw her—my wife! She was in my room—my old room—I tell you! Ivy, it was you, dear, was it not? Ivy!"

Isobel Falconer stepped backward a few paces; her hands pressed over her heart.

"What—what is that he says—what does he mean?" she gasped, her face taking an ashen pallor.

Ivy went hurriedly to Mrs. Falconer's side.

"He cannot know," she somehow at this moment deemed it wiser to assure the elder woman, frightened to see her look so startled and so ill. "His mind is clouded—wandering. Perhaps—possibly he is thinking of—of his little cousin, dear. I mean the little daughter you lost years ago!"

Isobel Falconer was leaning heavily for support against the tall oak wardrobe. Ivy put her arm around her as she stood there; but she was rallying; for a faint pink colour was creeping into her cheek.

"That cannot be," Mrs. Falconer said in a troubled whisper—"for he never in his life saw her—that little cousin of his; my own darling child; never that I can recall." And she put her hands to her forehead, and bowed her head in them.

At the moment Dr. Graham approached her, and said quietly—

"Mrs. Falconer, Sir Roderick should be told. There is no time to lose," he added meaningly.

She locked her hands together helplessly and shivered.

"Would you like me to break it to his grandfather?" suggested the doctor, kindly. "Perhaps it might be best."

"Oh, if you only would!"

So Doctor Graham quitted the room forthwith, beckoning Mrs. Whitney to accompany him on his errand.

"Ivy—Ivy!" spoke the voice of Ronald. In an instant she was kneeling by his pillows

again, her arms placed well beneath them—in that manner raising his face nearer to her own.

"Yes, Ronald, I am here. Do you know me?" she said gently. "I am Ivy, your own wife; and I am here with you, Ronald, at Huntingtower."

"At Huntingtower!" he echoed, faintly, with partly-closed eyes. "Am I then really at Huntingtower—and you too, Ivy—back in the old place at last?"

"Yes, Ronald. Really back in the old home," she said.

"Ah, I remember!" he groaned. "But I do not understand—how strange it all is. Haven't I been a brute—a bad husband to you Ivy?" he broke off unexpectedly. "If so, try to—to forget—to forgive—"

"No, no, no—there is naught to forgive. Do not, dear love, think of the past now! Ronald, you remember your aunt Isobel?"

"Aunt Isobel! oh, yes—poor aunt Isobel!" he said dreamily. "Where is she then, Ivy?"

"She is here with us—"

Ivy stopped; for Isobel Falconer was kneeling by his side; was clinging with quivering touch to Ivy's arm as she knelt.

"Why—why does he so persistently call you 'Ivy'?" Mrs. Falconer said in agonized accents. "Why is it? I must—I will know!"

The uncontrollable trembling which had seized her frail frame seemed just then to pass magnetically from her body into that of Ivy Dundas.

"Because," Ivy managed to answer, as quietly and as soothingly as she could,—"because it is the truth. Ivy is my name—my real name."

Isobel Falconer's nervous hold on the younger woman loosened. As if in prayer she bent her head low to the bedside, and broke into a fit of smothered weeping.

"Kind Heaven!" Ivy heard her sob, "what—oh, what can be the meaning of it all!"

The door opened; and, led by Dr. Graham and Mrs. Whitney between them, Sir Roderick Dundas entered.

"Ronald—dear husband—do you hear me," Ivy said, speaking close to his ear, for it was impossible not to mark that he was sinking rapidly. "Your grandfather, Sir Roderick, has come. He is here—see—he is speaking to you—can you hear him, Ronald?"

Yes, he heard. He tried to raise himself, but could not. So Ivy and Dr. Graham together lifted him higher upon the large soft pillows.

"Grandfather—grandfather—forgive—"

They had placed the old baronet in an armchair at the bed-head. And there, crushed and dazed by a great grief, howbeit the real nature of which his enfeebled intellect could but dimly comprehend, Sir Roderick sat obediently—fondling and very childishly crying over one of Ronald's hands.

But Ronald's fingers were utterly nerveless—powerless now to respond to the weak pressure of those skinny paleid ones that so pathetically were wandering over and clinging to his. He could gasp out only—

"Grandfather, forgive!"

Isobel Falconer still knelt in prayer with her face hidden. Old Sir Roderick was still prattling and shedding senile tears, there in the chintz-covered armchair by Ronald's pillows, when the door of the room was opened noiselessly once more, and Johnson the valet said softly,—

"Mr. Keith Falconer."

He came straight to the bed and leaned over Ronald Dundas.

"Thank Heaven, dear old fellow, I am not too late!"

A last flicker of strength stirred the pulses of Ronald Dundas.

He stared rather wildly upward into Keith's compassionate eyes, and said hoarsely,—

"Keith! . . . You, old man, is it! Always a good friend to both of us . . . our best friend. Take care of my poor wife—I have not treated her well, I know. . . . I loved her, though—I loved her. And—and, Keith, you will help her—won't you—all you can!"

"I will. Heaven hear me! Ronald, listen," he said, with an emotion he tried in vain to control. "That same Heaven above us has been more merciful than you can imagine. Ronald, it



"I HAVE KNOWN IT. I HAVE FELT THAT IT WAS TRUE," IVY MURMURED, HALF UNCONSCIOUSLY.

was Ivy Falconer—your own cousin—whom you found at Dell Cottage amid the south downs; the long-lost, the long-mourned Ivy Falconer—never Ivy Moss—whom you took from that lonely abode and made your wife before the Registrar at Bleakferry. Consequently your grandfather, Ronald—dear old fellow, hear me!—is her grandfather. Your aunt, Sir Roderick's daughter Isobel, who is kneeling here now, praying for you in this room, is—none other than Ivy's own mother. Do you understand me!—verily her own mother!

"Time, Ronald, has righted a great and cruel wrong; and Ivy Falconer—Ivy Dundas—is at last restored to her own people. After long years of obscurity and separation she is once again beneath the roof of her own old home—at Huntingtower at last!"

"Heaven is good indeed," was all he said; and that was his last breath.

A long-drawn sigh, as from one who is very weary and is falling asleep; a smile of bright joy breaking over his now tranquil features; a scarcely perceptible quivering of the long eyelashes; and Ronald, with his dark head lying heavily on Ivy's bosom, was dead!

Someone, most lovingly, was guiding her blind footsteps away from that chamber of death.

Upon the threshold of it, going out, Ivy paused instinctively, slipping downward for support against the firm arm behind her.

Her strength was all spent. She could no longer stand alone.

"I have known it. I have felt that it was true—true, from the very beginning of my coming here," Ivy murmured half unconsciously. "Yes, somehow, I have known it all along. Oh, my beloved mother!"

"My own child. My own sweet daughter!" Ivy heard the dear voice answering, as though speaking afar off in some blissful dreamland. Ah, were they indeed among the living, or among the

souls of the departed! Were they in truth upon earth, or were they together in heaven!

It was Ivy herself who sank senseless into her mother's arms. Isobel Falconer, after all, in her great love, was the stronger of the two.

Some few hours later—it was nearing the autumnal sunset time—old Sir Roderick Dundas was missing and could not be found.

The baronet had very cunningly contrived to give his valet the slip; and Johnson had discovered his master's rooms empty!

Consternation seized the household. They searched for Sir Roderick everywhere in vain.

The humble domestics were awe-stricken—scared—the presence of death in the great still house had already robbed them of audible speech.

They crept upon tiptoe—they spoke with bated breath.

At length Mrs. Whinney, in conference with Johnson the valet, started; and she put her finger to her forehead.

A thought had occurred to her, and she said,—

"Johnson, we shall find him in—in that room. Come with me!"

And the faithful dame, who had passed a lifetime at Huntingtower, was right.

For there, safe and harmless enough, they discovered old Sir Roderick, crouching all alone by the bed-side, and holding fast within his own the hand of his dead grandson.

And when they parted reverently those two dead hands a small slip of tinted paper fell rustling lightly from between them.

At a glance they saw it was a cheque.

The writing upon it was barely legible, being the thin faint quavering scrawl of the poor old baronet himself.

Everything was duly filled in—everything, that is, save the amount to be cashed, and that had been left generously to Ronald's own pen.

So Sir Roderick Dundas had stolen back to that quiet room—once more, in this touching fashion, to assure Ronald that he was forgiven; really forgiven now!

(To be continued.)

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THE dolphin, a near relation of the toothed whales, is said to be the fastest swimmer in the sea. It has been observed to dart through the water at a rate decidedly greater than twenty miles an hour, and it is often seen swimming round and round a vessel which is sailing at its highest speed.



"YOU WOULD NOT DARE TO REFUSE TO GO!" BREATHED CLEM, INVOLUNTARILY.

MISS GILMOUR'S SECRET.

—10:—

CHAPTER X.

CLEM SUSPECTS.

FOR Rafe, the few days following his accident were full of unalloyed delight. Fortunately for the lovers the window of his study was a French one, opening on the lawn, and Ursula was thus able to slip in and out without arousing the attention of the household.

One morning, less than a week after the poaching affray, Clem came in the study, looking even more worried than usual.

"What's the matter?" asked Rafe. "Your expression is harassed enough for a Cabinet Minister!"

"I don't believe all the Cabinet Ministers put together have as much anxiety as the mistress of one household!" she returned, aggrievedly. "I'm sure I don't know how I shall manage, for three of the servants have just given me notice, and if matters go on like this, all the others will follow suit. You may well look surprised. The fact is there have been rumours lately of a ghost appearing in the west gallery, and last night matters came to a climax. Emma, the under housemaid, was walking along in the dusk, when a man's figure stepped out from behind a suit of armour, and stood in front of her; whereupon, after the manner of her kind, she screamed, and went off into a fit of hysterics. When I heard about it I went and searched the corridor myself, but there was no sign of any stranger, so I gave Emma a thorough good scolding which she richly deserved."

"And she, in return, gave you notice. Well, it seems to me you are about quits."

"It's all very well for you to laugh, Rafe, but I assure you it is no laughing matter. One never knows where an absurd rumour of this kind will end, and what are we to do I should like to know without a servant in the house!"

"Have a general picnic, I suppose, and wash the dishes ourselves."

"Oh," cried Clementina, snatching up her keys, "if you are going to treat it in that fashion, it's very little good my coming to consult you."

"Stay a minute, Clem, I did not intend to make you angry, but really a ghost is such a silly thing to tackle."

"And pray which are the hardest to tackle—silly things or sensible! You would soon find out, if you had a set of hysterical girls to deal with, let me tell you."

"What about the elder servants!—do they imagine the house is haunted!"

"I'm afraid they do, more or less. Two or three of them declare they have seen a mysterious figure in the west gallery, and they won't believe me when I tell them it was a shadow."

"Do you think it is anyone playing tricks!"

"He had better let me catch him, if it is, that's all!" exclaimed Clementina, and with such vicious emphasis that Rafe found himself pitying the problematical delinquent.

At that moment a diversion was caused by Clem suddenly darting forward to pick up a small bow of ribbon that lay on the carpet quite close to where the young man was sitting.

Rafe pretended to take no notice of the action, and she left the room, without having obtained much practical help in her domestic grievances, and with another difficulty looming darkly ahead.

As she passed the library door, which was half ajar, she caught a glimpse of Ruth sitting at the writing-table, and, acting under a sudden impulse, she went in, and showed her the accusing little bow of ribbon.

"It is Miss Gilmour's," said Ruth, taking off her spectacles and looking at her sister with her usual dreamy expression. "Where did you find it!"

"In Rafe's study! And I want to know what brought it there."

"She goes to play chess with him," answered Ruth, with unusual promptitude.

"The shame-faced minx! But how do you know!"

Ruth explained how she had found Miss Gilmour in the study on the night of Lady Redver's dinner-party, and almost maddened Clem by the composure with which she treated the incident.

"You knew this, and yet you never told me!" shrieked the elder girl. "And all the time this artful creature has been doing her best to entrap him, and make herself mistress of Westwood! Oh, what fools I have to deal with—what fools!" She wrung her hands frantically, while Ruth's eyes opened wider and wider.

"I don't see that my telling you would have made any difference, Clem."

"You don't see that it would have made any difference," scoffed the elder, who could have shaken her sister with the heartiest good will. "That's because you don't see anything, but a set of ridiculous figures that will never do you or anyone else one farthing's worth of good. You and Minna make a nice pair. If I were like you two, Heaven only knows what would become of us all!"

She flounced out of the library, and spent the morning in her own room, thinking over her discovery, and the conclusion to which it pointed. That the relations between Rafe and Ursula Gilmour had undergone a change, she felt convinced, but before she moved in the matter, she must assure herself beyond all possibility of doubt that her suspicions were well founded. Rafe was the last man in the world to brook opposition, but at all hazards he and Miss Gilmour must be separated!

The same evening, after dinner, the ladies all happened to be sitting in the drawing-room, Clem's fingers busy over her knitting, while her brain was still busier over sundry plans she was maturing. Her sharp eyes glanced furtively, now and then, in the direction of Miss Gilmour, who, strange to say, seemed engrossed in an album containing photographs of the different members of the Ferrer's family.

"I'm ready for my game of cards—who is

going to play with me!" asked Lady Sue, breaking the silence in her usual autocratic manner.

No one seemed anxious to accept the invitation, which, indeed, appeared to be the signal for a general move. Minna slipped quietly out, and Ruth was on the point of following, when Clem clutched at her sleeve.

"You stay and play with Aunt Sue," she commanded, imperiously. "I have housekeeping business to attend to, and I am particularly anxious Miss Gilmour should be free, do you understand!"

The only thing Ruth understood was that she must do as she was told; so she sat down opposite Lady Sue, and meritoriously tried her best not to look utterly bored, while her elder sister knitted away as if for dear life. Presently Miss Gilmour left the room, and then Clem's knitting was folded up, and in a few minutes she also disappeared.

Outside the door of Rafe's study she paused, but no sound of voices greeted her, and bold as she was, she dared not enter. Besides, even if she had done so, and had found Ursula within, the only effect of her visit, would be to precipitate matters and bring about a crisis for which she was not prepared. Accordingly, she wrapped a black shawl round her head, and slipped out of the little postern door of which mention has already been made, intending to peep in through the upper part of the study window, which was of stained glass, and over which the curtains were not drawn. Earlier in the evening she had herself carted a light pair of steps out of one of the greenhouses, and placed them in a convenient place for her purpose, against the wall of the house.

The night was unusually dark; a west wind, mournful and soft, was blowing, with a promise of rain, heavy cloudy masses entirely hid the stars. Clementina, however, knew every step of the ground, and thought the darkness an advantage rather than not. Slowly and cautiously she reached the ladder and began to ascend its rungs, clutching tight hold of the supports on either side to steady herself. Suddenly her left hand came in contact with something that assuredly did not belong to the mechanism of the ladder—something that was hard, and resistant, and that moved as she touched it—something that finally resolved itself into a human foot!

The famous imprint on the sands of the desert island, surely, never caused Robinson Crusoe more consternation than did this reality that startled Clementina. A foot on the ladder! That argued that the person to whom it belonged must be above it, and engaged in the self-same business as herself!

The foot kicked out vigorously on finding itself molested, Clementina flinched back to avoid the blow, the ladder oscillated, lost its balance, and came crashing down on the soft soil of the flower-beds, with a couple of greatly disturbed human beings beneath it. Never in her life before had Clementina found herself in such an eminently undignified position. To extricate her scraggy person with any grace was an impossibility, and recognizing this, she confined her efforts to getting clear of the ladder, and finding out the identity of her companion. It was not quite so dark as it had been, and Clem's eyes were sharp. She made out a smallish, lightly-built man, with a clean shaven face, and rather good features—a man she had never set eyes on before.

For his part he was evidently and undisturbedly anxious to escape; moreover, he had not the impedimenta of petticoats to contend with, and this gave him an undoubted advantage. Before Clem had even assumed an upright position he had ungallantly scrambled out and left her to finish her struggles alone, while he disappeared in the depths of the shrubbery.

It says a good deal for the eldest Miss Ferrer's nerves that she should still resolve to carry out her original design, after this very disturbing adventure. Without much difficulty she contrived to set the ladder up in its original position and then, for the second time, began her ascent. She groaned aloud at the picture revealed to her within the study. Ursula Gilmour was kneeling beside Rafe's chair, and he was placing

on her finger a ring which flashed into starry radiance as the light struck across it.

It was a ring that had belonged to his mother, and Clem knew but too well what the giving of it portended.

CHAPTER XL

ANOTHER MYSTERY.

POOR Clem's footsteps and her heart were about on a par for heaviness as she descended from her exalted position. Her worst suspicions were verified, and she saw before her a task whose difficulties made even her stout courage quake.

Indeed, so disturbed was she, that the trampling of her limbs rendered it impossible for her to reach the door, and she was glad enough to avail herself of a niche in the wall of the house which had formerly enshrined a statue, but which now made a comfortable and secluded seat. Here she remained for some minutes gradually recovering her calmness, which was, however, destined to receive yet another shock.

Quite suddenly a man's figure seated itself by her side. Then followed an incident that to this day fills Clem's maiden bosom with direct indignation, for, before even she was aware of his intention, he had thrown his arms round her waist and kissed her cheek!

Clem's one consolation is that, owing to the drapery she wore round her head, the kiss failed of its entire effect; indeed, the greater part of it was lost in crotchet wool-work, and only a tithe, so to speak, contaminated her virgin cheek.

"My darling! I was afraid you were not coming—you are later than ever this evening. That confounded fellow is still prowling round—"

The speaker came to an abrupt pause. Did the flat contour of the waist his arm still encircled suggest to him that he was making a mistake, or was he brought to a sense of his error by the involuntary shrinking that the action caused?

He started violently, drew back, looked for a moment into her face, then, with an exclamation of terror sprang up, and was off with even more swiftness than the hero of the ladder had displayed in leaving her to her fate.

As for Clem, her sensations were a chaos of disgust, surprise, and overwhelming curiosity.

What did these events mean? What brought two strangers to this quiet English homestead in the darkness of the night, and in the mystery of disguise?

One of them—the latter—had evidently come to keep a love tryst, but with whom?

Could it be with Miss Gilmour? Clem inclined to this idea. In her estimation Lady Sue's companion was an epitome of all the vices, and it would be quite in accordance with her supposed character to be "carrying on" with two lovers at once—Rafe within the house, and someone else outside.

"Oh, if I could but unmask her to Rafe, and let him see her in her true colours," Clem muttered to herself, with impotent fury.

She sat in the niche for some time longer, waiting to see if anything else would happen—for she had reached a stage when surprising events seemed quite the natural thing to expect, but as the only thing that followed was pins and needles in her lower extremities she finally entered the house, and after pausing in front of a mirror to smooth her hair and generally "put herself to rights," proceeded to the drawing-room with a view of finding out what members of the circle were missing.

To her surprise they were all there—Lady Sue and Ruth still playing piquet, Minna lounging in an arm-chair with a novel in her hand, Miss Gilmour soberly engaged in mending some delicate lace belonging to her employer.

Clementina caught herself wondering whether she had been the victim of an hallucination. The little group looked so quiet and matter of fact, that it was difficult to connect any member of it with what had taken place in the grounds such a short while ago.

She took up her knitting and the needles clicked as busily as her thoughts, until the French clock on the mantel-piece chimed half-past eleven—the signal for Lady Sue to go to her own apartments, and for the others to follow suit.

Somewhat to her surprise, Clem received a visit from Minna, who came in her bedroom "to say good-night," as she phrased it, but in reality, as it appeared, to have a chat.

"What are you going to do about the servants?" she asked, presently.

"Send them away as soon as I can get others to take their places, if indeed they don't go before. I never saw such a state as they are in. The kitchen is perfectly demoralized—and all because of this absurd ghost story."

"Do you know, Clem, I have been thinking, the best way to end these rumours would be to close the west gallery altogether. We really do not require it open; it leads nowhere except to the spare wing of the house, and as that isn't in use, it might just as well remain locked."

"And what about the rooms being aired?"

"Oh, that is a secondary consideration. It will be a most serious matter if all the servants leave—and that they will do so is almost a foregone conclusion now."

"It is nothing of the sort," replied Clem, tartly. "I intend putting a stop to the tales in quite another way."

"What way?" inquired Minna, rather breathlessly.

"By taking the housekeeper and all the upper servants through the west wing to-morrow, and making a thorough examination of every hole and corner—yes, even of the turret which has not been entered for so many years. I shall throw open all doors and windows, and as soon as dusk comes I shall have lamps lighted in all the rooms as well as in the passages, and I shall continue the lamps every evening. I fancy that will soon exorcise the ghost," she added grimly.

Minna was silent; her fingers played restlessly with some hanging fringes she wore from her waist, and Clem, noticing the movement, noticed also that the fingers themselves looked curiously slender and transparent.

This made her glasses wander upwards to her sister's face—how thin it was, and how white! Why, the child had altered terribly within the last week or so.

"Aren't you well, Minna?" she asked, with a softening in her voice—for if there was a tender place in Clem's heart it was owned by this little sister.

She put her hand on the girl's shoulder, and to her great surprise Minna suddenly burst into tears, and without vouchsafing a reply, rushed from the room.

"I think all the world is mad to-night!" said Clem to herself, as she proceeded to undress and get into bed.

Perhaps it is not wonderful, under the circumstances, that she should have had disturbed dreams.

Once she fancied she heard a noise in the hall downstairs, and a little while afterwards a door slammed—sounds that ordinarily would not have affected her, but which now made sleep an impossibility. She tried to calm her disordered nerves by the reflection that a window inadvertently left open, would be quite enough to account for the disturbance, but such endeavours proved futile, and at last, tired of tossing from one side to another, she got up, put on slippers and a dressing-gown, and prepared to make a tour of the house—a pretty good sign that the supernatural had no terrors for her.

Everything seemed to be as usual. She could discover no window open, and no draught likely to account for the slamming of the door. She was just on the point of returning upstairs when her ears caught the sound of a key being fitted in a lock, and this brought her to a pause.

She was standing at the end of the passage, leading to Rafe's study; at the other end was the postern door which was in process of being unfastened.

Clem was no coward—indeed, physical courage was one of her strong points, and without a moment's hesitation she blew out her candle and

"I suppose he didn't think, or else he followed a natural impulse," Lindsay added, laughing.

Maddie blushed, well pleased.

But Julian Colonna might have been neither thoughtless nor impulsive in giving his hand last to Lindsay. Lindsay never dreamed of that solution, nor did Maddie; the elder because she was too little self-conscious, the younger because she was too much so.

All this time Maddie had only once met Farmer Ingledew, and then she had tried to conciliate him, because she was just a wee bit afraid of him; and he, almost yielding to her coquetries, was the more resentful when the charm of her actual presence was removed; but for the most part the girl avoided him, and the young man's jealousy inflamed more and more, as he heard how Maddie had met Mr. Colonna here or there, how he had taken her home, and so on. Yet his wrath was directed more against the man than the woman; if he were out of the way Maddie might yet be won.

Maddie, for her part, troubled her head very little about her quondam admirer; if he chose to "sulk" he could do so; she was free to give her love where she would. And though her conscience was not quite easy as she tried to persuade herself, she did not allow its occasional reproaches to interfere with her pleasure, or dim the bright hues of the dreams she was weaving about the future.

Lindsay, meanwhile, kept on her steady way, and let things take their course. She smiled when Rose Edgar once observed that, after all, none of them knew anything about Julian Colonna, and there must be some mystery in his past life. So there might be, but nothing discreditable; of that Lindsay was convinced. If ever a man was loyal and true this stranger was; she would hearken to no gossip that defamed him.

He called at Beechmore a day or two later while Maddie was out, and they had a long talk about "Rossetti"—he sitting by the fire or standing near the table, where Lindsay was busy over some culinary work.

She was sorry, she said, that Maddie was out, and so she was—for his sake, not for her own; it was so nice to have a talk with a kindred spirit about her beloved books; but Mr. Colonna did not seem to miss Maddie, and never once alluded to her, which would have struck Lindsay if she had been wiser in *les affaires du cœur*. Presently she went out to the dairy for something, and when she returned her companion had vanished.

He came in immediately, however, carrying a small volume in his hand,—

"See here!" he said. "I have been rummaging among your bookshelves—and I have found a rare old copy of *George Herbert*."

"It belonged to my father," said Lindsay; "you can take it home if you like."

He paused, looking at her.

"But, Lindsay," said he, smiling a little; "you know nothing about me, and this book may prove a great temptation."

He had not yet used her Christian name when speaking to her, though he had spoken of her by it; she was pleased that he now dropped all relic of formalism.

"You will not run off with my Herbert," she said, laughing. "I wouldn't lend him to anyone else; but I can trust you."

"The least thing belonging to you is a priceless treasure." Some such words were in Julian Colonna's heart; but Lindsay was so utterly unconscious, so frank and fearless, that he stifled them, and only saying, "Thank you; I will take the greatest care of your book," sat down.

"Only," pursued Lindsay, "please don't let Mr. Johnstone see the book, because he asked me to lend it to him, and I refused."

"Why?"

"It was my father's," she said, "and all that belonged to him is sacred. I seem to know you better, somehow, though I have known him longer." She could not add, "You are nearer to me, because of Maddie," so left the sentence unfinished, and, in truth, this would have been the wrong conclusion, though Lindsay was not aware of it.

Colonna looked up with a sudden flash in his

dark eyes which the girl did not see, and stretched out his hand to her. He gave him hers, and he stooped and kissed it. It was a seal of brotherhood, Lindsay thought, and she was very happy that he should feel so.

But when he was gone misgivings that had often haunted her troubled her still more.

Was he really fond of Maddie? He treated her so much as if she were a mere child; that was not like a lover, surely; and Maddie! she was not capable of the love such a man would require. She would always be a child; but men were always blinded by beauty—and certainly Maddie was very lovely—"a dream of fair women."

That night the snow came, and when Lindsay rose in the early morning the landscape was one sheet of dazzling white.

"What a bother!" said Maddie, almost crying, when she rose—much later—for it was snowing still. "I must go to Rose Edgar's today."

"Why must?"

"Mr. Colonna will be there," said Maddie, blushing, and laughing. "Can't you come, Lindsay?"

The question was not asked very cordially. Lindsay replied quietly,—

"No, chick; I shall be busy." Mr. Colonna would bring Maddie home, and neither of them would wait her.

(Continued on page 160.)

THE ROMANCE OF IVY MOSS.

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CHAPTER XXV.

REVEALED.

It was merely for a few seconds, not longer, that Ivy remained thus completely unmoved and stupefied, just at a time when presence of mind was required before aught else, and when every minute was precious—crouching there by the open bedroom window, the midnight rain blowing in upon her, and listening helplessly to the moaning voice of Ronald that came up to her so faintly from the dark terrace-walk below.

No—only for a few weak dazed seconds; and then she sprang to her feet; pale enough and dishevelled, but with every faculty now aroused and alert.

The truth must out, and be faced at last—there was no help for it! No longer could it be shirked and kept in the background! The time of dreaming and of vacillation had gone by; prompt, swift action and cool common-sense above all things were suddenly demanded in place of them. And the hour found Ivy strong and ready. She flew to Mrs. Whitney's room straightway. And in as few words as possible she explained to the old woman what had happened.

Mrs. Whitney sat bolt upright in bed, well-nigh scared out of her senses, and as white as the sheets and pillows around her.

"Lord ha' mercy upon us!" ejaculated the good old dame. "What—what is to be done, Mrs. Drew?"

Ivy told her rapidly what she thought ought to be done, suppressing meanwhile as best she could her own agitation and excitement.

"Lose no time. Call up immediately some of the men-servants, and send one of them as fast as horse can take him to Salisbury for Dr. Graham. But whatever you do," counselled Ivy, "do not disturb too abruptly Mrs. Falconer and Sir Roderick—I mean, for the present, at any rate. Let us first ascertain the worst. I—I myself am going directly to the terrace. Join me there, Mrs. Whitney, please, will you? And—and it would be best to bring some one with you, the instant you can come to me."

Three minutes later Ivy was out of doors, wrapped from head to foot in a thick gray woollen shawl and had fought her way through

the wind and the rain round to the broad high terrace above the pleasure-grounds.

She found him.

She bent close over him; she lifted his head to her knee; she called him very tenderly by name—yet he did not answer her. He was not dead, however; for now and then he groaned as he lay there upon the cold wet flag-stones.

"Ronald—Ronald," she whispered, "it is I, Ivy, your wife! Speak to me, dear, if—if you hear and understand."

He moaned again, and that was all.

She had remembered to bring out with her some brandy, and she managed to put the glass to his lips. He swallowed a little of it. In the stormy gloom which enshrouded them she peered yet lower, yet more eagerly, into his quiet face; and she fancied that his eyes had opened and were staring upward into her own.

"Ronald," she said again, very softly, "do you know me, dear? It is I, Ivy. They will come out to us and help us directly. A doctor will soon be here."

He just stirred, ever so slightly; but he was not, she could perceive, conscious. And for this insensibility she thanked Heaven fervently; for she knew that his injuries must necessarily be of a dreadful nature.

With her warm woollen shawl Ivy, leaning over him, made a shelter for his head as it rested against her knee; so that the cold rain should not beat upon his face. And as she bent thus above him, and felt his head touching her bosom, something of the old great love that she had once conceived for him, but that had now lain for so long moribund far down in her heart, awoke within it, stirred again ever so tremulously; and with a sob of deepest pity she bowed her head to Ronald's and kissed his chill white brow.

"Oh, Ronald," she cried piteously, "say, dear, that you forgive me! Do not leave me forever with those words of pardon unsaid."

Presently in the windy gloom Ivy saw a group of figures hastening towards Ronald and herself. Two of the men carried lanterns; others were bearing between them a narrow mattress. Mrs. Whitney, breathless and distressed, led the way.

"Oh, ma'am—Mrs. Drew," wept the good old soul—"will he—will he know any of us? I always loved him—always. Will he—can he speak to me, the dear lad?"

"No."

"Oh, Mrs. Drew," she was beginning tearfully again; but Ivy checked her abruptly.

"Do not call me that!" she cried sternly, passionately. "It is not—it never was my name!"

In a sort of weeping wonder Mrs. Whitney gazed at Ivy, almost thinking, indeed, that her reason was at fault. But it was no time for questions—explanations—idle, unnecessary talk. Mrs. Whitney knew that as well as Ivy herself.

"I will make it all clearer—will tell you more by-and-by," she amended hurriedly. "Forgive me, Mrs. Whitney. I did not mean to speak to you as I spoke just now."

Very carefully had the men amongst them raised Ronald Dundas and placed him upon the narrow mattress. The hall door was open; upon the wet outer darkness the light from within streamed forth ruddily; and all very carefully and slowly they made their way towards it.

The stable-yard clock chimed a quarter to one. "You have sent for Dr. Graham, I hope?" Ivy said.

"Yes, ma'am. He ought soon to be here. I should say," answered Mrs. Whitney.

"In which room will they put him?" Ivy asked.

"You mean Mr. Ronald, ma'am?"

"Yes."

Then Mrs. Whitney, in a broken voice scarcely audible, explained that one of the best rooms at Huntingtower was always kept aired and in readiness, in case Mr. Keith Falconer might arrive at any time, and be willing to pass the night there. Already had Mrs. Whitney lighted a fire in the room, and Mr. Ronald could be at once taken to it.

"And it is the one, you say, that Mr. Keith Falconer usually occupies when he is here?" Ivy inquired quickly.

"Yes, ma'am. It is the third you come to in the bachelors' corridor."

"Ah, that is downstairs, is it not?" said Ivy eagerly.

"Yes, ma'am, downstairs—close to the billiard and smoking rooms. There will be no stairs to carry him up," whispered Mrs. Whitney, "if you were thinking of that?"

"Yes, Mrs. Whitney; I was thinking of that."

They reached the hall-door. The men and their burthen entered first. The old housekeeper, halting a moment, touched Ivy's arm.

"The dear mistress knows," she said.

"Knows of this—this accident, do you mean?" exclaimed Ivy anxiously.

"Yes, ma'am; you see we were obliged to tell her."

"She had heard the commotion, the hurrying to and fro, and she came out in her dressing-gown to learn what was the meaning of it all. There was no help for it—she insisted on being told—"

Here Isobel Falconer herself glided towards them, trembling and very pale; but on the whole, calmer and braver in the circumstances than Ivy had dared to hope. It had frightened her to think how this terrible calamity might affect the strength of Isobel Falconer.

She glanced fearfully at the dark, quiet figure upon the mattress, and clung to Ivy as she said, with a shudder:

"Oh, Ida, Ida, this is indeed dreadful! What shall we do? Tell me more about it—how it happened. I could not understand Mrs. Whitney, she was too upset and excited. It all seems so terrible—so awful—I do not comprehend."

For a space Ivy held Mrs. Falconer to her breast. "Do not—do not any longer call me, 'Ida!' she cried hysterically. "I cannot bear it."

Isobel Falconer raised her worn sad eyes inquiringly.

"Why, what are you saying, dear? That I must no longer—"

Ivy interrupted her, gently putting Mrs. Falconer aside.

"Presently—later," she said, hurriedly, "I will tell you more—all. Come, let us go with them—they are taking him to Mr. Keith Falconer's room in the bachelors' corridor. We must do all we can, you know, until Dr. Graham arrives to help us."

"I am here," announced a brisk voice close by; and turning with a start, they beheld most thankfully the clever surgeon from Salisbury. Already he had divested himself of his hat and overcoat, and was in the act of drawing off his stout driving gloves.

Dr. Graham went at once to the bachelors' quarters—to the room whither the men-servants, directed by Mrs. Whitney, had carried Ronald Dundas.

Isobel Falconer and Ivy, now and then shivering with anxiety and apprehension, waited outside the door of that and room together. They clung to each other, waiting for the verdict—waiting to learn the worst, but saying never a word.

The doors of Huntingtower were massive—only the subdued buzzing of half a dozen voices stole out to them as they waited there in the corridor.

By this time the whole household had been aroused and was astir; and it all seemed very ghostly and sorrowful in these dark chill small hours of a new day. Old Sir Roderick and his valet Johnson, in their remote part of the great house, were alone at present in ignorance of what had happened.

"Ida," breathed Isobel Falconer involuntarily, "the sleeve of your gown is quite wet—soaked through. I can feel it! Is it—is it rain?"

There was a lamp upon the panelled wall near to where they stood, Ivy, moving a little away from her, and with her back to Mrs. Falconer, held up her arm to the light. She examined the sleeve narrowly.

"Yes," she said at last, as steadily as she could—"it is rain."

It was not. And she knew it. Rain, it was

true, there might be upon it; but something else had soaked the sleeve of her gown red—and that was blood.

Just then out to them came Dr. Graham; Mrs. Whitney—her faithful old eyes inflamed with weeping—following him. He looked exceedingly grave.

"Well?"

With painful eagerness Ivy put the brief inquiry; whilst Mrs. Falconer herself remained dumb, holding tightly within her own the while Ivy's quivering hand.

"I find that I must drive back immediately to Salisbury," replied Dr. Graham evasively. "I am in urgent need of things which I have not with me here. I shall not be gone long. In the meantime Mr. Dundas must on no account be left alone for a minute. If he speaks—at present he is not conscious—get him to take, whenever he can, just a spoonful of brandy or a little champagne. Nothing more—until I return. Either will do him no harm—"

Ivy broke in impatiently:

"Of course. But what we want to know, if you please, doctor, is—there any hope at all? Can he—live?"

"Impossible."

When Ivy could speak calmly once more, she said,—

"How long—how long, doctor, will it be?"

"He may linger for some few hours yet—it is possible, mind you, though, not likely, but it is certain that he will not live to see another sunset."

Then Doctor Graham turned to Isobel Falconer.

"His spine and one of his legs are fractured," he explained gently; "and there are other hopeless injuries besides."

Ivy cried out passionately,—

"I shall stay with him, then—watch with him until the end!"

Isobel Falconer, the old housekeeper, and the Salisbury surgeon were all three of them staring at Ivy, struck dumb seemingly with amazement.

It was Mrs. Falconer who spoke at length. "That we cannot allow, dear Ida," she said, in her loving, quiet way—and she put her arm round Ivy's waist as if she would so guide her from the door of Ronald's room. "On the contrary, you must go to your bed and rest. I am sure that you are worn out, as it is. You have done enough for us—indeed too much, dear—already. It is for me and Mrs. Whitney to stay with Ronald; not you."

"Yes, for me," answered Ivy firmly, "if for any one! My place now, so long as he remains alive, is by the side of Ronald Dundas!"

"Ida!"

"Dear Mrs. Falconer," said Ivy more gently, her head dropping wearily to Isobel Falconer's shoulder, "believe me, I am not crazy. I know quite well what I am saying—the simple truth. Do not—do not ever again call me Ida; it is not my name. I—I have deceived you from the first! Pardon me—oh, forgive me if you can—I am Ronald Dundas's wife!"

Throughout that most sorrowful night Ivy watched in Ronald's room. No one now disputed her right to do this; for it was somehow felt dimly by everybody around her—incomplete as was, as yet, her confession of the fact—that she had spoken only the truth—the solemn truth only.

Doctor Graham returned early to Huntingtower, bringing with him a case of surgical instruments and a quantity of lint and oil silk. It seemed to Ivy that the surgeon had been gone for hours; in reality, so they assured her, it was barely half-an-hour.

How oddly, how keenly, she thought, the doctor watched her, as she washed the oozing blood from a horrid gash that they had found beneath Ronald's thick beautiful hair!

An unerring instinct told Ivy what was passing through the mind of the surgeon, at the time. He was thinking that if what he saw in her was grief for her husband, it was an emotion curiously cold and repressed.

"All the same, I loved him once—very dearly

once," she said audibly, in a hollow mechanical tone, "though you may not believe it. But I did—I did, I tell you! I loved him more dearly than life itself!"

She looked straight, and perhaps somewhat defiantly, at Doctor Graham as she spoke thus; whilst he answered her with a slight deprecating movement of the shoulders, and went and busied himself in another part of the room.

Someone was standing behind Ivy; and a light tremulous hand was laid upon her head.

She looked up. She saw then that it was Isobel Falconer herself.

Mrs. Falconer had brought a little tray with her; and upon it there were wine and sandwiches. She forced Ivy to swallow some of the refreshment lest she should faint, said Isobel Falconer anxiously, from sheer exhaustion. And Ivy, remembering how little she had been able to eat at dinner on the past evening, obeyed.

"Has he spoken—is he conscious?" asked Mrs. Falconer, very low.

"No; not yet."

"I wish," she began, "I wish you would go and his down, Id—" She corrected herself.

"I wish, dear, that you would allow me to take your place for an hour or two, so that you might rest," amended Isobel Falconer wistfully.

"So long as he breathes I do not stir from this room," Ivy told her, gently but firmly.

Mrs. Falconer sighed, and inquired,—

"Does Doctor Graham say there is a chance of his recognizing any of us before—before the end?"

The surgeon, still busy at a table in a corner with his lint and instruments, overhead. He threw his voice, as it were, across the room in a whisper.

"Just a chance, Mrs. Falconer," he said—"and no more."

"What is the time now?" Ivy asked. "My watch has stopped."

Mrs. Falconer glanced at her own, and then showed it to Ivy. It was a quarter-past four. It would shortly be daybreak.

"Does Sir Roderick know? Have you told him yet?" Ivy asked then, looking up drearily at old Sir Roderick's daughter.

"About—about Ronald?" faltered Isobel Falconer.

"Yes."

Mrs. Falconer shook her head hopelessly. Her father was asleep, she said; and Doctor Graham was of opinion that it would be unwise to disturb the old baronet before his customary waking hour. He was too old and too infirm to bear the shock without due caution in preparing him for it. They must be very careful in telling the old man. But Johnson the valet knew—he was up and dressed—and he would come and apprise Mrs. Falconer directly his master awoke.

"It is too strange—it seems impossible!" she murmured involuntarily, turning upon Ivy her wistful gaze.

Ivy divined her thoughts, as she had read those of Dr. Graham.

"You mean," she said quietly, with the unnatural calm that is born of intensest sorrow, "you mean that I should be the wife of Ronald Dundas? Yes, to you, I grant, it must seem strange—incredible—impossible indeed!"

Isobel Falconer's pale face flushed. She bent and kissed Ivy's hair.

"Believe me, dear, I do not doubt you, but at present it—it is so hard to understand."

"If ever in this world he should speak again," Ivy rejoined, "depend upon it you will hear the truth from his own lips. He will recognize me—his wife—and you will hear then what he says. Wait!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

"THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW."

WHEN the chill gray light of day struck through the closed window-curtains Ronald Dundas was sleeping—and quiet. Ivy was alone with him.

The others had left her just for a few minutes, Mrs. Whitney having come to say that breakfast

Colonna—he is waiting to say good-bye. I will bring up your tea to you."

She went back the parlour.

"Maddie says you told her you could not stay to tea," she said to Colonna. "I am sorry for that. Must you really go?"

"Not if you will ask me to stay," he said, smiling.

"I do ask you. You know you are always welcome!"

"That is very good of you, and I am always glad to be here. How is Maddie now?"

"Better. It is not much of a sprain."

Maddie had made the most of it, she thought; but she was too generous to say that.

When Lindsay took up her sister's tea Maddie was ready to cry to hear that Julian Colonna had stayed, after all, and wanted to come down again, but this Lindsay forbade.

"How can you!" she said. "It would be making too much fuss—besides, who is to carry you down? Lizzie is out—and I am not strong enough."

Maddie did not dare to suggest Mr. Colonna, so she was compelled to submit to her fate. She was not a bit jealous of Lindsay, for the idea of Lindsay as a rival never occurred to her.

Had Julian Colonna, the elder girl wondered, spoken to Maddie! and had he stopped this evening in order to ask her (Lindsay's) consent to his proposal! He did not talk about Maddie at all, but about books and music; but sometimes he would be silent for a minute or two, and rouse himself with an effort.

After tea they sat down by the fire, and Lindsay was going to seat herself opposite to her companion, but he touched a low chair next to his own, and asked her to sit there.

She obeyed the wish without hesitation, and for a few moments both were quite silent, looking into the fire. Then Colonna turned to her, and said, suddenly,—

"Lindsay, have you ever wondered what made me come to this place?"

Lindsay lifted her eyes to his.

"Only passing," she said, "it was no concern of mine. They have a dozen tales about you in the village."

"I know, but you pay no attention to gossip."

"Not the least."

"You really do trust me, Lindsay!"

"Yes; I would not say so unless I felt it."

"No, you are truth itself; but I should like you to know why I came here."

"Don't tell me if it pains you," said Lindsay, gently; "I would not have you think that I desire to know anything that you do not wish to speak of."

"I do wish to speak of it—to you. That is why I remained this evening when I knew I could see you alone."

He took her hand in his, laying his other hand on it, so enfolding it, as it were, and went on,—

"I was sick and disheartened when I came here, Lindsay, and had been for years morbid, many—may be most—would call it so in our day, but I was in my own eyes a dishonoured man—that does not startle you?" for the hand he held had not stirred.

"No, why should it?"

"Heaven bless you, Lindsay! Why are not more women like you! But Nature broke her mould when she made you. No! the dishonour I bore was not my own guilt. I have been seven years worse than widowed, Lindsay."

"Seven years ago my wife left me—fled from her home with a man she had only met that season."

"We had been married two years—no more—but if I did not love her as I can love I was always kind to her."

"I was tired of loneliness—I thought she loved me, but she speedily undeceived me; my wealth had been the bait, not me."

"Still, we never quarrelled—there was peace, if not much happiness. Then came this man across her path—a fop and a fool."

"She fled. I followed them. I found her and offered to settle on her an ample sum if she would turn from her sin and lead an irreproachable life."

"She told me, fiercely, that there was one thing I could do for her—divorce her, that she might marry her companion. That I could not do. I believe, as you do, that the Church allows no divorce."

"Gladly would I have broken the chain that bound me, if I could, but that was impossible. Then she said she would drag my name through the mire, and she kept her threat."

"She led a life of infamy—no need to say more now, at any rate—and I shunned all who knew me, and wandered from place to place, seeking rest and finding none."

"Eighteen months ago she died—died quite suddenly in Paris—died in the splendid hotel provided for her by some Russian prince."

"I was free, but freedom had no sweets for me. I still dreaded to return to the world that had known me, but now had all but forgotten me."

"I came here in the course of my wanderings; it was quiet and remote; no one would know Julian Colonna in this spot, and I meant to live apart, and see no one. You know how that resolve was broken through. That is all my story, Lindsay, the only mystery about me."

He had spoken very quietly, stating simple facts, without any diversion or colouring, and Lindsay had listened without a movement.

Now, as he paused, she said, low and falteringly,—

"I am grieved—I am so bitterly grieved for you!"

She stopped; she did not seem able to say more, but as he looked down he saw that her long lashes were wet with tears, and Lindsay's tears did not flow readily; she was like a man, not like a woman, in this as in many other things.

She had no idea how precious her sympathy was to Colonna, and he feared to tell her yet; he so dreaded to lose what he had—what might grow to be what he wished—in reaching out too hastily to snatch that which might have no existence now.

He kissed her hand—that was all, and they sat together, hand in hand, in the firelight, till it was time for him to leave, scarcely speaking a word, both happy in the other's presence, only that the woman knew not the secret of that happiness, and the man did.

When Lindsay went up to bed Maddie was lying broad awake. She called her sister to her side, and Lindsay sat on the edge of the bed and said, gently,—

"What is it, little one?"

The influence of that sorrowful confidence, of the sweet, solemn moments that followed, was on her; she was not attuned for foolish chatter and fancied love-making.

Maddie laid her sunny head on her sister's knee.

"Lindsay," she whispered, "Lindsay."

"Well, chick!"

"I—I—do love him—and I think—I am sure he loves me."

"How are you sure?"

"So many things—" a pause. "And this afternoon, when I fell—"

"Go on, dear."

"Well, you know, I slipped—and my foot doubled under me—and of course I cried out; he caught hold of me, right up in his arms, and said so quickly, 'My darling child! are you hurt?' and I cried; and then he said, 'Never mind, little one, we're close to home—close to Lindsay,' and then he carried me—so easily and carefully, in here. Well, Lindsay," lifting her head a little "you don't speak."

"Is that all, Maddie, dear?"

"What more is needed?" said Maddie, half consciously quoting from a story she had read in one of the magazines.

But Lindsay thought a good deal more was needed to raise Colonna's words to the dignity of a *quasi* proposal. To the clear sense of the elder girl he seemed to have spoken to Maddie as if she were a child; the mention of herself looked as if he thought "Lindsay" was the goal of Maddie's thoughts; whereas, if he had believed the child loved him he would have known a lover is more than the dearest of sisters.

This evening's experience had made her more than ever dubious about Colonna's feelings, for his confidence was not followed by any allusion to Maddie. He might have thought the confession due to them as friends; but whatever reason he had for making it it did not appear that it was with any special reference to Maddie. Therefore Lindsay said, gravely,—

"I don't want to say anything unkind, Maddie—you know that; but you should not let yourself imagine that Mr. Colonna loves you. I cannot see that what he said to-night shows anything more than kind interest in you; don't let yourself think too much of him, it may end in disappointment."

"Oh, Lindsay! how cruel! one cannot help loving anyone! You don't know, you never did love."

"No, but I daresay I know as much about it as you do, Maddie. I only want to warn you; you are very young, and you may be attaching too much importance to words and actions which may mean nothing. Mr. Colonna is more than twenty years older than you; he might think of you almost as a child—"

"I am sure he doesn't, Lindsay! Even Rose Edgar said he seemed to like me."

"You did not say anything to Rose, Maddie!"

"No, but Rose is awfully jealous of me; they all are, I think."

"That is half the fun!" said Lindsay, with unusual bitterness. "No, Maddie, I am not angry, but I am pained—you treat these things so lightly. I laugh at your silly flirtations, but when it comes to what should be a matter of life and death you talk in just the same way. It's all wrong—all miserably wrong!"

"Lindsay!" cried the other, "what's come to you?" Then she laughed her childlike laugh.

"Oh! you dear old Lindsay! you get notions of love from 'Rossetti'! That's only poetry—no one loves in that way really!"

"They ought to," said Lindsay, rising, "or let it alone. You cannot understand it—it is not in your nature—you have no depth—no strength; you have no passion; you play with the greatest forces of human life just as a kitten would play with a chain of diamonds. I have no patience to hear you babble in one breath of a loyal man's love and the vulgar jealousy of a poem of country girls!"

Well might Maddie stare to hear such burning words from Lindsay; the beauty almost believed she was dreaming. Lindsay herself was astonished later at her own outburst; but just now Maddie brought her accuser to book by bursting into tears; and Lindsay, thinking she had, perhaps, been too severe, soothed the child tenderly, till presently Maddie grew calmer, and went to sleep with her head on Lindsay's shoulder.

But the elder girl lay long awake, and still it seemed to her a cruel thing that Maddie should make a toy of a sacred trust and offer Julian Colonna so paltry a return for all the wealth of love he had to give.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE snow lay hard and crisp on the ground; without it was dark and cold, but within the kitchen at Beechmore all was light and warmth.

Maddie sat in the settle reading a novel; her foot was quite well now—there never had been much the matter with it; but now and then she went to the window and peered out.

It had begun to snow lately, and Lindsay was out—down the village; she ought to have been back before now.

Lizzie had run over to a neighbour's, but the mastiff was in the house, so Maddie was not afraid of being alone for a while.

She sprang up gladly, however, when a knock came at the door, and not doubting it was Lindsay, ran and opened it; but fell back with a startled cry as a tall, stalwart man strode in and shut it behind him. It was Robert Ingledow, with a brow as black as the night outside.

"Robert!" was all Maddie could gasp out, paralyzed with fear.

"Do you think I am come to murder you,

little fool!" he said, with a sullen ferocity, his eyes glowing like living coals; "If I shed any blood to-night it will not be yours. I love every drop of it too well for that; though you've driven me mad with your cursed beauty and coquetry. Ah, it's no good looking about for help! I have timed my coming here too well. Lindsay won't be back till it's too late, and you can't stay me; if you tried to do it I would kill you then. When the deed's done you may tell all the country side; I don't care if they hang me. You've trampled out all the life I care for!"

"What deed, Robert?"—the girl was panting with terror—"what is it you are going to do!"

She shrank back as he came close to her, but he grasped her wrist—his burning breath fanned her cheek.

"I am going to kill your lover," he said. "Don't shriek! there is no one to hear you; even your dog cannot come to your aid, for the door is shut and he is in the parlour. I saw him there before I came. You have fooled me, but he shall not have you—the accursed smooth-tongued foreigner. He's going out soon—too soon for any help that you could get to reach him; and you'll not dare now to seek it. Women like you weep and faint, but never risk their precious lives. I am going to wait for him where he must pass, and shoot him like a dog. Let go! it is too late for prayers now!"

For Maddie had struggled to her knees, and was trying to cling to him—but he held her off—trying to tell him that he was wrong, quite wrong. She did not love Colonna, but only him (Ingledew), and would be his wife if he would spare Julian Colonna.

"Too late, I tell you!" said the man, savagely. "I'll not be deceived again! I'll torture you as you have tortured me. Leave go, or I shall be too late for my trust! ha! ha!"

He seemed more like a maniac than a sane man as he wrenched her clinging hands from his arm, and flinging her back so roughly that she fell prone on the floor, rushed from the house.

For some minutes Maddie lay where her sometime lover had left her, senseless. When she came to herself she was at first dizzy, and could not recall what had happened. Then the whole awful truth rushed upon her, and she sprang to her feet with a despairing cry.

What was she to do! Could not Julian Colonna be saved!

She ran to the door; the night looked wild and black. What use to go to the village! Ingledew had said all help would be too late—besides, she dared not go, Ingledew might be lurking near, and might shoot her as he had threatened.

She shuddered, and drew back. She cried and sobbed hysterically, she beat her hands together, and ran up and down the room, calling hopelessly on Lindsay—Lindsay to whom she had always turned, and turned now in extremest peril, in which one grain of Lindsay's courage might have done more good than all this blind, childish faith in one whose brave spirit could avail nothing now.

Suddenly the door burst open, and Lindsay appeared.

"I was detained—Great Heavens! Maddie, what is it! who is in danger!"

For Maddie was clinging to her, crying, sobbing, laughing, trying to say something, but only contriving to make audible the words "Save him!"

"Save who! What do you mean! Speak clearly, girl, or I will make you," said Lindsay, her voice hard and stern with a deadly fear.

Thus adjured, Maddie gasped out what had occurred.

"Oh! Lindsay, save him," she sobbed, "save him—for my sake!"

"For your sake!" cried the other, white as death; "could you make no effort to save him! You feared Ingledew—the night—the snow—and you might save the man you love!"

She stopped choking, but she had not been idle while she spoke those passionate words; she was rapidly taking down from a shelf and loading a pistol.

"Lindsay!" said Maddie, with wide eyes of horror; "what are you going to do!"

"To shoot Robert Ingledew before he can shoot me, if I chance upon him," said Lindsay.

She went straight out, without another word, the door changed to behind her, and Maddie flung herself, sobbing, on the floor.

Never had Lindsay's brain been clearer, cooler, more ripe for cautious, as well as swift, action than it was to-night, while her heart was like molten fire.

She had not one thought now of Maddie—only of the man she might be too late to save, between whom and herself lay two miles of snow and darkness.

Heaven knew how many precious minutes had been lost for a woman's cowardice, while a man's life that should have been a thousand times dearer to her than her own hung in the balance.

At ordinary times the road from Beechmore to Friar's Place was clearly defined, and one well-known to Lindsay; but snow and darkness combined rendered it a task of no small danger to traverse it—a danger increased on this particular occasion by her ignorance of Ingledew's movements, and the possibility of his seeing her from behind some shelter, and shooting her before she could "get a shot" at him.

The recent fall of snow had helped to confuse the track, and increased the peril of falling into a snowdrift; and these things, as well as the slipperiness of the ground, made very swift progress impossible.

But dangers were no deterrents to Lindsay. One brief prayer she uttered for help, and plunged fearlessly forward on her errand of life and death.

She was sure-footed, and rarely slipped, but three or four times she narrowly escaped a snowdrift—once she sank half-way up to her knees, and struggled out with difficulty; but her brave heart was set like a flint, and she fought on through the snow and darkness.

Her ear was strained to listen, with sickening dread, for the sound of a shot; and then came the awful thought that it was too late to listen for that, and her eyes sought for a sight that should freeze them in the sockets—for blood on the white snow, and a prostrate form that would never move again.

Those keen eyes sought also for another form, and the resolute hand was on the pistol that it would not have faltered to use.

And then—then Lindsay was searching for another sign—for the gleam of a light, for she was drawing near to Friar's Place now. Yes, this was the gate; she could not open it, but she forced her way easily through a gap in the broken railing, and almost ran up the path to the door.

She saw no sign of light; but still he might be at home, and have closed the shutters.

She reached the step, and pulled the bell with a force that made a clang loud and deep. She heard a door open—a hasty step—a bolt was withdrawn, the outer door opened, and a flood of light fell on Julian Colonna.

"Lindsay!"

She staggered blindly forwards, and he must have caught her in his arms, for she did not fall; but she remembered nothing clearly till she found herself in a large room bright with light and fire, reclining in an arm chair, her hood and cloak removed, and Julian Colonna bending over her.

She looked up into his face and took his hand in both of her own, as if to assure herself that it was he in flesh and blood; and he smiled though he was trembling, and took a glass of wine from the table near.

"Drink this," he said, gently. "You can tell me when you are better what brought you here." She drank some of the wine, and put it from her. She was quivering now from head to foot, but she would not give way to the impulse to burst into tears.

She crushed it down, biting her lips, and whispered—

"I can tell you all—soon—but I was anxious—and—exhausted—I thought I might be too late—"

"Too late for what, dear Lindsay!"

He was curbing tongue and hand, for she was deeply agitated, and needed to be calmed, not

more excited; besides, a brave woman like Lindsay would risk her life for even a stranger in peril, and her words pointed to peril. She might have no special interest in him.

"Too late to save you," said Lindsay, more steadily. "You were going out to-night, were you not!"

"Yes; in ten minutes more I should have left the house."

Lindsay caught her breath with a quick gasp; but conquered herself again, and went on—

"You were in danger of your life. Farmer Ingledew was watching for you. He swore that he would shoot you; he knew that you were going out—"

"Farmer Ingledew!" said Colonna, in deep amazement. "Are you sure of this, Lindsay! Why should he seek my life? I have done him no wrong."

Now Lindsay paused; cheek and brow were crimson; she turned aside her face. It was so difficult to avoid betraying her sister.

"He loved Maddie," she said, in a low voice, "and he thought—"

"He thought that I was a rival!—and for that he would have murdered me!—How did you know all this, Lindsay!"

"Ingledew came to Beechmore to-night while I was out and told Maddie what he was going to do; and he would shoot her, he said, if she tried to foil him. When I came home I found Maddie distracted. She told me what had happened. Then I came on here."

The pistol she had carried was lying on the table.

"And you brought this!" he said.

Lindsay looked at the weapon; from it straight up to her companion's face.

"To shoot Robert Ingledew with," she said, "if I should meet him, and gain the first chance to fire."

"You ran a terrible risk of your life!"

"That didn't matter."

"There was great danger, in any case, in traversing on a dark night, with snow on the ground, and drifts in many places, the road from Beechmore to Friar's Place."

Lindsay did not want to be made a heroine, she said, rather shortly—

"Yes, there was danger; but one doesn't think of that when lives are at stake."

"You don't think of it, Lindsay, but I must. How am I to thank you for saving my life at the deadly risk of your own!"

"Thank me, please, by not thanking me!"

"That may be best, for I have no words. Deepest gratitude has least speech; and it does not lessen my obligation that you might have done as much for almost anyone else!"

"I think I would!"

"Now let me give you something to eat; you must need it, and afterwards I want to talk to you a little, if you will let me."

"I cannot eat anything, thank you!" said Lindsay. "I feel almost myself again, already!" It was the mental strain that had shaken her far more than the physical.

"Are any of your clothes damp?"

"No, scarcely; my skirt is nearly dry. My boots are thick, and saved my feet."

She rose up and went and stood before the fire to dry her dress. Colonna stood by her and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"Lindsay—tell me honestly—do you think me a lover of your sister's!"

"No," said she, looking steadily into the blaze; "that is, you might be—I could not tell. I don't know much about such things."

"What things?"

"Why," said she, somewhat confused, "you might be fond of her, and I not know it—you are so reserved."

"I am fond of her in a way; but she is to me a mere child, and she will never be anything else, Lindsay. Feeling like this, my manner may not always have been what it should be to a girl not actually a child in years; but, if so, it has been quite unintentional; I never dreamt of being so misconstrued. I would not be misjudged by you, Lindsay."

"I do not misjudge you! I know you could not trifle with anyone!"

Colonna did not immediately answer, but the hand he had laid on her left shoulder—he was standing on that side of her—was passed round to her right; and he drew her nearer to him, till she was close by his side.

The girl glanced at him fleetingly—not meeting his eyes—and her own fell again; she was growing bewildered; her heart beat fast; a wild, sweet sense that defied analysis, and banished all power of thought, was stealing over her.

She had no wish to break the silence that reigned; she could have stood like this for an hour; even Maddie was forgotten; indeed, Maddie had scarcely been remembered all along. It was not for the little one's sake she had braved so much to save Julian Colonna.

Presently Colonna spoke very softly.

"I wish I could believe, Lindsay, that you have done more for me to-night than you would have done for anyone else—stranger or even friend!"

"But," said the girl, trembling—trying not to see the deeper meaning that such words almost forced upon her—"I could do no more than save your life!"

"I don't mean that, Lindsay—I think you know it! You might do as much for anyone else, but would it be with the same feeling?"

No answer. The question took the girl's breath.

Then Colonna put his other arm round her, and held her to his breast, and curbed no more the passion in his heart, but let it have way.

"Don't you know, Lindsay, that it is glorious happiness to owe my life to you! Don't you know that I want to owe you more—ten thousand times more—than life! What was in your heart when you came to me to-night, my darling! Was it the mere noble instinct to save life, or was it friendship, or"—he lifted the face she had hidden against him, and bent his lips almost to hers as he whispered the last question—"did you come because you loved me!"

Lindsay's clear, steadfast eyes looked straight into his for one moment, but all her heart was in the look—the next her lover's kiss was on her lips, and Lindsay knew that mighty secret of love which brings down Heaven to earth, which may come to the peasant and be denied to the queen.

"I did not know it," she said, after a long, long silence, and the clear, crisp tones were broken and faltering; "I never thought of anyone loving me."

"They were fools who passed you by, Lindsay. Yet I am glad they did. It was you who kept me here—"

Lindsay's quick look, and the flash of colour in her face made him pause.

"Well," he said, smiling, and passing his fingers caressingly through her curls.

"You must have thought me very foolish," she said, "that I never dreamed I was anything to you. I ought not to have been so blind."

"I did not think you foolish, Lindsay. I knew you too well for that; but I own I was puzzled; I could not detect in you one sign of interest in me. You were so frank, so fearless—your hand did not tremble when I held it in mine, your eyes never shunned my look. What gave me most hope was your letting me have *George Herbert*. Do you remember what you said!"

"Yes," She leaned her head against him, and drew a long breath. "Yes, I know now why I liked you to have the book, though I would not lend it to anyone else—and there were other things—" She paused again. "Did you tell me anything about your past life because you loved me?"

"Yes, my darling; I wanted you to know the truth concerning me—I wanted your sympathy, too. I had almost told you then how much I loved you, but I feared to speak too soon."

Lindsay sighed.

"I must have given you pain," she said, wistfully. "How was it I did not know definitely, to-night, that all my life was bound up in yours! I think I know, partly, what helped to blind me before; but to-night, when Maddie told me that Robert Ingledew was going to murder you, and it seemed I might be too late to

save you, there was just one thought in me—to reach you—no, not thought—if I had thought of you I might have known the truth, afterwards, if not at first. It was you filling my whole being, I should have dashed even Maddie to the ground if she had stood in my way. I had gone out of myself."

"I have not deserved such love, Lindsay," said Colonna, tenderly; "how is it that I have won it!"

He would have drawn her to a chair near, but Lindsay started and changed colour.

"It is late," she said, "I must not stay, I must go back to Maddie."

It struck her with a sharp pang that she would seem to Maddie to be a traitor—that the little sister would perhaps turn against her when she heard that Julian Colonna's love was given to Lindsay. But was not he free to choose whom he would!

"If you go back," said Colonna, "I must go back with you."

"No, no," cried Lindsay, impetuously; "Ingledew may still be watching."

"Do you propose, then, to go alone, or with Felton, who will not be in till near midnight!"

Lindsay stopped in perplexity, pressing her hand to her forehead. The only other way from Friar's Place to Beechmore was five miles round, and was impassable in times of snow; the road she had come was dangerous; moreover, if she allowed her lover to accompany her to Beechmore he must remain there for the night. He could not obtain lodging in the village—which was half a mile or more farther on—for everyone would be in bed, even if lodgment were to be had. It was far better that she should remain at Friar's Place, only Maddie would be left in suspense all night. That this necessity had not before presented itself to Lindsay showed how completely she was absorbed by the overwhelming thought; but she would not have acted differently, though her name had been a by-word in all the country side.

"Then I must stay here to-night," she said, slowly.

"I see no help for it, my darling." He took her in his arms again, soothing her fondly, for brave Lindsay was qualling under the lash of that fear which no woman dares to face with unflinching gaze. "I would that this could have been spared you, Lindsay; but there is no cause for dread. It will never be known that you were at Friar's Place this night. I will take you back very early in the morning. Neither Felton nor your servant will gossip about you. Maddie will be in suspense—about you more than me—but she will not suffer as you would; besides, we cannot help her."

"No," said Lindsay.

She breathed more freely, and suffered Colonna to place her in the arm-chair again. A ring at the bell made her start, but Julian smiled.

"It is only Felton," he said. "I will explain matters to him, and tell him to bring some supper; you must need it."

He went out, but soon returned, and ere long supper was brought, and afterwards the two sat together as they had sat in Lindsay's parlour when he told her that sorrowful story of his life; only now his arm was round her, and her head rested on his breast.

"I will write," Colonna said, "to Robert Ingledew, and explain the truth, and ask him to see me. I can forgive him, Lindsay; he is, I believe, nearly mad—and the little one, I am afraid, cannot be held blameless. She must have given Ingledew some encouragement. I never knew there was anything serious between them, or I would have acted differently to Maddie."

"She shall tell me the truth about Ingledew," said Lindsay, steadily. "I have warned her that he was not a man to be trifled with. I will not exonerate myself. I ought to have been more strict; I have thought too little of Maddie's flirtations."

"You may have been in error, Lindsay, dear; but your nature could never compass Maddie's; she is coquette to the soul, and she is so often out of your sight that you cannot always watch

her actions. She must have deceived you about Ingledew."

"Yes," Lindsay's eyes were full of tears. "Oh! why does Heaven give so much beauty with so little heart!"

Why, indeed! A mystery that must for ever remain insoluble.

Colonna at length reluctantly dismissed Lindsay to take some rest, giving up to her his own room, while he stretched himself on the rug before the library fire; and though at first Lindsay was too excited by all that had occurred to slumber, "nature's sweet restorer" came to her aid at last, and she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER IX.

IN the early morning Julian Colonna and his young companion started for Beechmore. It was safest to go on foot, for the roads were too slippery for horses.

There was some dread in Lindsay's heart lest Maddie when she saw Colonna should betray herself; but the probability was that Maddie would have gone to bed, and would be fast asleep—Lizzie would be up.

They went up to the kitchen entrance and knocked softly, and in an instant the door was opened, and Lizzie had fairly thrown her arms round Lindsay's neck, sobbing and laughing in her joy.

She seemed almost inclined to welcome Colonna with the same warmth.

"But Maddie!" Lindsay asked. "Where is Maddie!"

"Gone to bed, poor lamb; and cried herself to sleep."

"I will tell you all soon, Lizzie," said Lindsay, and went at once to Maddie's room.

There lay the beauty, the stains of tears still on her pretty cheeks. Lindsay bent down and softly whispered her name, and Maddie awoke with a shriek, and flung herself on her sister's breast.

"I thought you were lost. Oh, Lindsay, did you save him—he isn't killed!" she cried, in a breath.

"He is saved, Maddie; he is here!" said Lindsay, caressing her sister fondly. "I was just in time—no more. Hush, hush! Maddie, try and be more calm!"

But Maddie was almost in hysterics from the reaction, and Lindsay made at first no serious effort to control her, deeming it best to let her excitement have way.

After a few moments, however, she made Maddie exert her self-command, and then she told her briefly the events of the night, keeping back, for the present, the whole truth as regarded Colonna and herself.

She would tell that to Maddie later, when they were alone together; but part she must tell her now, though it was bitterly hard, when Maddie asked, with the pleading look in her blue eyes, what Colonna had said of her.

"Maddie, darling," said the elder, gently, "you must put all that out of your heart—he does not love you. He told me so. He said you were a child to him—he had never dreamed of any other love."

Maddie burst out afresh.

"Oh, cruel, cruel! He made me think he loved me—he did, Lindsay—he did!"

"Maddie, be just. He was kind and affectionate to you, nothing more. I will talk to you about this another time. Perhaps you had better not meet him just yet; I will tell him you are not well."

"I won't see him—I will never see him again!" cried Maddie, her head buried in the pillows, and Lindsay left for a while.

She would recover herself better alone; too much sympathy is no kindness to a grief that arises more from a wounded vanity than a wounded heart.

Perhaps Julian Colonna had some glimmering of the reason why Maddie could not see him, but, of course, he gave no sign.

Lindsay made him stay to breakfast, and, meanwhile, sent a messenger to Oak Tree Farm,

who returned with the news that Farmer Ingledew was at home.

Colonna then wrote to the young man, stating that Lindsay returning home and hearing of his (Colonna's) peril, had contrived to despatch a message to warn him. He added:—

"In regarding me as a rival you have erred entirely; even if I had been I should have wronged you ignorantly, knowing nothing of any nearer tie than friendship between yourself and Madeleine; but I was fond of her rather on her sister's account than her own. It is Lindsay whom I love, and Lindsay is now my promised wife. I was never for a moment dazzled by Madeleine. What more can I say! For the rest you may thank Heaven that your soul is free from bloodshed, though judge you whether it is free of blood-guiltiness. If you will come to me at Friar's Place I should like to see you. I have no feeling of resentment against you, and no thought of revenge. My lips will never betray you."

Robert Ingledew did not disregard that generous letter; he went to Friar's Place, and Colonna then learned how Maddie had led the young man on, and how, so soon as this stranger came, she had cast him aside.

"And, I suppose," said Colonna, "if she pretended to love you now, you would be deceived?"

"No!" cried the young man; "no, I know her too well now."

But the other smiled and shook his head.

"Ingledew," he said, "be advised, and put yourself beyond temptation. Women like Maddie wind men round their fingers, and woe betide the men who marry such women! The girl never loved you; she will never love anyone seriously. She will marry some day—don't wince—it will be a good day for you, and if her husband be a fool he will be satisfied with her; but a man of any depth or strength of feeling would be weary of her in a few years—possibly in a few months. One needs a nobler nature, a truer heart, to stand the test of possession."

And if Robert Ingledew did not feel the full force of those words then he felt them later, when that episode of his life in which Maddie had played so prominent a part seemed like a bad dream.

The next day Julian Colonna went down to Beechmore. Lindsay was alone, and her lover saw that something had disturbed her, though she tried to hide it.

"Where is Maddie?" he said.

"She is upstairs," Lindsay replied. "She is still unwell."

It had been a trying scene with Maddie yesterday, as Lindsay had anticipated; the younger girl had reproached her sister with having "stood in her light."

The injustice of this reproach was too gross to be anything but contemptible, yet Lindsay was deeply pained that Maddie should be capable of such a thought and such words. Of course Maddie would get over her temper, but the stab had been given.

"Come here, Lindsay," said Colonna.

"You must not ask me any questions," she said, going to him obediently.

"Must I not ask you what it is that troubles you?" said Colonna, taking her in his arms and kissing her.

"No, I could not answer."

"Very well; but will the trouble pass?"

"Yes—soon—very soon."

"You must not have troubles that I cannot share, Lindsay."

This was a new idea to Lindsay; she had always borne her own troubles alone, and often carried those of others as well; with Maddie there was no reciprocity; the dual life was something of which Lindsay had yet to learn the happiness.

"I never will, if I can help it," she said; "but I don't realise things yet; I seem to have lost my old identity."

"I want you to lose it soon, Lindsay. What are you going to do with the farm?"

"I can let it—if you like."

"If I like!" said he, laughing. "I am not

going to learn farming, and I don't mean you to remain at it. Do you wish to be a farmer still?"

"No, oh, no!"

"Not if I wished it!"

"Yes—then."

"Are you always going to be so meek?"

"That is not meekness; it is only that because I love you all your wishes are mine. I shall never be meek."

"I don't think you will; but I hope I shall never ask you to be, Lindsay."

"And you won't want me to part from Maddie, will you? I couldn't do that."

"No, Lindsay; let Maddie live with us till she finds another home. When are you coming to me, Lindsay?"

"Whenever you like," she said, quietly, though she coloured now.

"Very soon, then, dear one. And now, good bye. May I come back this evening?"

"Of course you may."

At first Maddie declared that she would not live with her sister after her marriage. How could Lindsay suppose she would! But when she reflected that this decision would prevent her appearing as a bridesmaid, also that she had no other home than Lindsay's, she thought better of it; and very lovely she looked in her white dress and jewelled locket, far outshining Rose Edgar, who shared the honours with her.

It was a very quiet marriage, but all Westholt went to see it, for Lindsay Mansfield's engagement was the one topic of conversation in the village.

Nobody had thought Lindsay was the one chosen; many had believed Maddie the attraction; but those who looked beneath the surface of things—and they were not a few—commended Julian Colonna's choice. Lindsay was one in ten thousand.

It was reported that the tenant of Friar's Place was very rich; and gossip was right for once in a way; but Lindsay had never asked her betrothed husband a single question on the subject. Certainly she was no Elsie.

Lindsay and her husband went away—went abroad, travelling from place to place, and all the "magic charm of foreign lands" was opened up to the clear, bright mind of Colonna's wife.

She wrote home to the few friends she had in Westholt, and the last they heard was about Maddie's engagement to the younger son of an earl.

He was not very wise, but he was good-looking and kind-hearted, and was, perhaps, a better husband after all than the little beauty deserved. But Lindsay would always hold the first place with her.

She had looked up to the large-souled elder sister from her cradle, and would probably call upon her name with her latest breath.

There is generally a strong point in the weakest natures, and Maddie's strong point was Lindsay.

[THE END.]

SOME Paris growers have introduced a new race of roses. They belong to the Polyantha group—that is to say, they bear their flowers in trusses. The new roses have the advantage over the others of being "perpetual" and consequently they flower continuously all through the summer. This advantage they owe to their origin, a natural cross between the flowering Polyantha and some hybrid perpetual roses. By repeated and careful selections a new race of roses has been produced, which, like annuals, germinate, flower, and produce seeds in less than a year. The term "dwarf" is justified by its height, which in adults is only about twenty inches. The flowers are single, semi-double, or double, in almost equal proportions, and present almost all the variations of colour observed in cultivated roses. Flowering commences in the first year, and even a few months after sowing. This precocity is one of the most remarkable and interesting features of this new type.

REWARDED.

—20—

It seemed to Kate Chester that the perfection of all things had come that glorious summer day—perfection of things physical and spiritual, as, beneath the quivering shadows and dancing sun-glints that flecked from a cloudless sky through the branches of the great horse-chestnut, she sat gathering strawberries—great luscious strawberries, that Dare Verner thought were not unlike the ripe, juicy richness of her lips—lips altogether too lovely to belong to a girl in such a station in life as she filled.

He had been lounging on the grass, at a little distance from her, a half hour or more, watching her from under his half-drooped lids, and thinking what a hand and wrist she had, and how much better jewels would have looked there than on Marion Thorne's, for instance.

From where they were he could hear Marion's voice, singing a fragment of Italian opera in a cold, classical, correct style; as like the girl as he imagined Kate's voice was like Kate—eager, enthusiastic, sweet.

Kate heard the singing, too, and wondered what the Italian sounds meant; thinking as strawberry after strawberry dropped from her dainty finger and thumb into the huge, gold-banded punch-bowl on the grass beside her, that for all Marion's money, and style, and position, she would not change places with her—she, a servant of Mrs. Barfield, of Barfield House, who took summer lodgers—she for whom all the world was goldenly glorified that sweet summer day, because Dare Verner had told her he loved her.

At first it had seemed so utterly impossible—Dare Verner, the elegant, the fashionable, the patrician scion of an aristocratic impoverished family, the pet and darling of the ladies, for all the depleted condition of the family exchequer—that this god among all his fellows, so handsome, so winsome, so debonair, so chivalrous, should come to worship at her shrine—hers, and she an obscure assistant in the general house-work at the house where Dare Verner and a half-dozen other gentlemen, and as many more ladies and children, were lodging.

It had seemed ridiculously impossible; and when, only an hour before this blissful hour under the trees, Kate had heard Mr. Verner tell her how lovely she was, how far above her position she was, how fitted to grace any position in society by right of her glowing beauty, her sweet modesty and her native grace, refinement and intelligence, there had come a swift ecstasy of happiness to her, as he looked in her eyes with such tender passion and ardent admiration.

She had listened at first a trifle haughtily, thinking it presumptuous in him; then, when there was no mistaking the earnestness of what he was saying, she had been confused, and a little afraid, and then very honestly happy.

"It is so unaccountable," she said, gravely, lifting her sweet, shy eyes to his. "I cannot understand how you pass by all those grand ladies, who are your social equals, to—to speak so to me."

Verner selected a particularly luscious crimson berry before he answered,—

"Just as I pass by all these other fair fruits and take this—the sweetest of them all, my darling!"

He touched her crimson-stained hand with his own white fingers, on one of which was a cameo ring.

"And now, Katie—I don't like 'Katherine,'—now my Katie, if you love me I want you to—"

He leaned suddenly forward and kissed her, finishing the sentence most literally on her quivering lips—lips that received but did not respond to the caress, although her whole face flushed and lightened at his sweet tyranny.

"My own little girl! How I wish I could spend all this long, fair summer day with you, instead of knowing you will be busy and tired, while I shall be drafted into service equally uncongenial! But promise me this, dear—you will think of me all the time, and to-night, as near half-past nine as possible, steal out

and meet me at the carriage entrance, and we will have a walk. Yes?"

And then, audaciously snatching a second kiss—he had so often wanted a kiss from her lips—he sauntered off towards the house, where Miss Thorne was reading a new novel, in a rustic rocking-chair, while Katie took her bowl of strawberries into the kitchen.

Marion looked up haughtily at Verner's smiling salutation, meeting his saucy blue eyes with her flashing dark ones.

"My dear Marion, you look like an animated thunder-cloud. Has anything happened to mar your happiness since I parted from you, an hour ago, to enjoy my after-lunch cigar?"

He seated himself comfortably in another big rustic chair opposite her, throwing his straw hat on the floor, and folding his arms above his head, looking very lazy, very much at ease, and remarkably independent and handsome.

Then, half-smiling, and knowing perfectly well what Miss Thorne's answer would be, he calmly awaited it, watching her twist her silver bangles around her rather thin arm.

"Your cigar! Dare, I have not a remnant of patience left with you—you have not even courage enough to admit the truth. If you have been flirting again with one of Mrs. Barfield's maids do be manly enough to say so, and not try to make me think you have been smoking all by yourself this last hour!"

Miss Thorne's voice never changed from its ordinary, chilling intonation as she delivered her remarks. She was entirely too well drilled in society requirements to permit a hint of temper to be manifest in her voice, no matter how tempestuous the words.

Mr. Verner listened courteously, still half laughing at her.

"Flirting with one of the maids! Why, Marion, my dear, your opinion of me and yourself, must have changed materially if you really believe me guilty of such rank injustice to yourself and such a display of poor taste on my part. Flirting with one of the maids! Really that's too rich!"

"There's one of them—Kate, I believe—who certainly is very pretty; that is, to anyone who admires that style, which I am sure no gentleman would do, and which I am very sure no engaged gentleman should do!"

Marion was icily severe now, and Dare thought, as he looked at her cold, fair face, and thin, passionless lips, of another eager, eloquent face, where his words called such hot flushes—of other lips, so exquisite to sight, to touch.

"Yes, you are right, Marion—you are right pretty generally," he drawled out, graciously, indifferently. "A fellow would be a fool to waste his time making love to a kitchen beauty simply because she was a beauty, when he thereby missed his chance of being entertained by—you, for instance."

And so witching was this fellow's manner as he said it, and looked it, that the girl really believed he loved her, and not her fortune.

Her face flushed a trifle as he spoke, and she leaned toward him, appealingly.

"Then promise me, Dare—promise me you will not even look at her again; not because I am jealous of such a common creature as she, but because I want to be sure of the man to whom I am engaged."

He threw her a kiss and laughed.

"Consider yourself promised, my dearest, although what possible interest I can have in such a 'common creature,' as you truly say she is, I cannot tell. If I have ever spoken to her it has been merely a pastime—indeed I doubt whether or not I have ever exchanged five words with her."

And then, just as he and Miss Thorne went down the steps for a leisurely promenade under the shade of the trees, Kate Chester turned staggering away from the vine-screened kitchen window, her face white and drawn with a pain she had never felt before—a pain that comes to a loving, trusting woman, when she learns how false, how base, her lover can be.

Several hours later, while Mr. Dare Verner was waiting impatiently by the carriage entrance—waiting and wondering why Katie did not come

to the tryst to which she had agreed so shyly—Kate was sitting in her little bed-room under the eaves, her bright golden head bowed in the star-light, her face pale and piteously calm, her tearless eyes full of unrestful shadows, as she realized how ruinous had been her very first venture on the sea of love.

And at the same time, downstairs in the guests' parlour, there was a flutter of delightful excitement over the unexpected arrival of Mr. Beaufort, another wealthy member of the Thorne family—a distant cousin of Marion's, of whom she never tired talking—whose appearance, possessions, and manner had been discussed among the little circle at Barfield House until the sudden advent of the original genius, on his way to the Lake District, where he was to join the Moretons.

"You can never tell how glad I am you took us in your way, Horace," Marion said, almost enthusiastically, an hour or so later, when—Dare Verner having returned, half vexed, quite disappointed—the entire party were gathered on the piazza.

Mr. Horace Beaufort laughed at his cousin's unusual demonstration.

"Don't flatter yourself, Marion, that you are the only attraction; although I admit you are a very delightful one. I am on a mission—a mission as romantic as was ever undertaken by knight of old. I am trying to find the heiress to the immense estates of the Moretons. Since old Jasper Moreton died, a few months ago, his widow, who is childless, has determined to adopt her husband's sister's child, between whose parents, while they were living, and old Mr. Moreton, while he was living, was a deadly estrangement. But old Mrs. Moreton is big-souled and generous-hearted. She is lonely, and often ill, and she wants to find Kate Chester—that's her name."

Dare gave a little exclamation, that was echoed by Mrs. Barfield incredulously.

"Kate Chester! There's a Kate Chester living with me—a sweet, pretty, well-bred, intelligent girl; and if I've said it once, I've said it a dozen times, that she never was cut out for anything but a lady. I do wonder if it can be the same one you are looking for!"

Marion Thorne's eyes were fixed on Dare's face. This Kate, who had charmed without her money, as she very well knew, despite her lord and master's asseverations to the contrary, would doubtless prove a formidable rival now, when so richly dowered, when so far beyond herself in the golden scale.

"Why, it is quite a romance! Do go and find her, dear Mrs. Barfield, and let us see if she be the one. How can you tell, Horace! Dare, please describe the interesting young lady. You are acquainted with her better than any of us."

If Marion meant her shaft to be sarcasm-tipped she certainly failed, as Mr. Verner had accompanied Mrs. Barfield on her search for Kate; for in that one second he had grasped the situation, and fully made up his mind that he would marry the heiress, and Marion might care or not, as she pleased.

While Miss Thorne, annoyed and vexed by her lover's evident interest, made up her mind that since Mr. Dare Verner was so easily infatuated with a pretty face without the fortune, there was not much use in her trying to keep him at her side, when to that fascinating face was added such fairy gifts as fortune and social position; and that she would not be humiliated by being jilted, but would give Dare Verner his *congé*, and deliberately set to work to marry her cousin, Horace Beaufort, and thereby unite the two fortunes.

It was a curious condition of affairs, which fate was ordering to suit herself, and in whose hands Kate Chester was the instrument for the straightening of all the tangled threads.

Dare Verner met her in the hall. He had just seen Mrs. Barfield going up the stairs after her by the other flight.

"Katie, I want you. Come here, Katie, dear—"

Then he stopped before her angry white face and haughty eyes.

"Miss Chester, if you please, sir, for all I am

nothing but a 'common creature,' a 'servant in Mrs. Barfield's kitchen,' with whom to exchange 'a word,' whether 'five or fifty,' is simply a 'pastime.' Remember to lower your voice the next time you discuss your affairs with the 'lady' to whom you are engaged."

He understood it all now; saw at a glance why she had failed him.

"But listen only a moment, Ka—"

She croaked her head proudly, as though she were the "daughter of a hundred earls."

"Not a second—not one word!"

Then she went on, and, a moment later, Mrs. Barfield met her, and brought Horace Beaufort to her in the library.

It was just a year afterward that the fashionable world was delighted by cards to the wedding of Miss Katherine Moreton and Mr. Horace Beaufort—all but Marion Thorne, who, when she had dismissed her lover in cold hauteur, had found she was fated to fail to win Beaufort—all but Dare Verner, who, despised by one woman, and jilted by another, was about as miserable as any man could be; and yet as justly miserable as such a man ought to be.

FACETIE.

"CALL that fellow a barritone!" said the disgusted author. "He's only a bass imitation."

BROWN: "I hear you are the happy father of twins." JONES: "I am the father of twins."

FRIEND: "Your son, I understand, has literary aspirations. Does he write for money?" FATHER: (feelingly): "Unceasingly."

FROM A CHILD'S COMPOSITION.—"The climate of Palestine is very hot and mountainous, especially where the country is flat."

CHOLLY: "How would—aw—like to own a little—aw—puppy, Miss Moneyful?" Miss M.: "This is so sudden, Mr. Softleigh."

COPPERFIELD: "It is as hard to stand success as it is to stand failure." MICAWBER: "Yes; but there is a novelty about success that makes it interesting."

CLARA: "So you're engaged at last?" MAUDE (rather elderly): "Why, how did you know I had accepted him?" CLARA: "I heard he had proposed."

FATHER: "£7 10s. for a suit of clothes! I never paid that for a suit in my life." SON: "Well, you'll have to begin now, father; here's the bill."

STOUT LADY (at street crossing to policeman): "Could you see me across the street, officer?" Policeman: "Shure, madam, I could see ye tin times the distance, aisy."

BOASTFUL YOUNG MAN: "I was knocked down senseless by a cricket-ball two years ago." Old Gentleman (in the corner): "How long before you expect to recover?"

HOWSON: "Beastly mean of you to refuse to lend me ten pounds. One friend should always help another." LEANING: "Yes; but you always want to be the other."

CARRIE: "Why was it, I wonder, my poor husband never said anything to me about remarrying?" ANNA: "Probably you are not the person he wanted to warn."

LAWYER: "What's that book you are reading?" LAW STUDENT: "Oh, it's a book on common sense. 'Yes, sir; and reading such a book as that would ruin your mind for legal work for ever.'"

"WELL, Tommy," said the teacher, "you were not present yesterday. Were you detained at home in consequence of the inclemency of the weather?" "No, ma'am, I couldn't come 'cause of the rain."

A REPORTER, in describing the murder of a man named Jorkins, said: "The murderer was evidently in quest of money, but, luckily, Mr. Jorkins had deposited all his funds in the bank the day before, so that he lost nothing but his life."

"WHY, Clara, you look radiant! What has happened!" "I have just received an invitation to a wedding." "Well, there's nothing particular in that to go into raptures over." "Yea. But it happens to be my own." And she showed the new engagement ring.

GUIDE (to Miss Elderly): "This is the ancient ruin, mum." Miss Elderly (hot, tired, snappy): "The idea of bringing me all this way to see that thing. I don't call it either particularly ancient or ruinous." Guide (savagely): "Well, mum, of course it ain't in comparison with you!"

MRS. BRICKROW: "How do you manage to persuade your husband to buy you such expensive bonnets?" Mrs. Topflatte: "I take him shopping with me, walk him around until he can't stand, and then wind up in a bonnet store. He'll buy anything to get home."

HUSBAND: "My dear, it was very thoughtful of you to buy this elegant smoking-jacket for me, but I really cannot afford to wear anything so ruinously expensive." Wife: "That's too bad; but never mind, they will take it back." "And give you the money!" "Oh, no, but they will exchange it for a dress pattern."

"SAY, mister," said the urchin to the man who was driving a very poor horse, "do you want somebody to hold him?" Mister: "No. This horse won't run away." Urchin: "I didn't mean to hold him fast so's he won't run away. I meant to hold him up so's he won't fall down."

MRS. GRAY: "Strange that you should consult Dr. Jalap, when your husband is a physician." Mrs. Black: "I find it more helpful to consult Dr. Jalap. When I begin to tell him about my bad feelings he always asks me to put out my tongue, but my husband only tells me to hold it."

STEINITZ, the chess-player, sometimes becomes so absorbed in considering a problem that he will stand still in the most crowded thoroughfare. It is related of him that on one occasion he caused such an obstruction that a policeman told him to move on. "Excuse me," replied the champion, absently, "but it is your move."

MR. MECK (on street-car): "I find that I have no money to pay my fare this morning. I have had my pocket picked." Conductor (bluntly): "That old story won't go here. Pay or get out." Mr. Meek: "It wasn't a pick-pocket. My wife went through my clothes before I got up." Conductor (sympathetically): "All right. Pay next time."

FIRST THIEF (in hotel bedroom): "Go quiet, Jim. There's a woman asleep in that bed." Second Thief: "It don't matter if she wakes up." "It don't? One scream would bring half the folks in the house to the door." "She won't scream. If she wakes up she'll throw the clothes over her head and keep still." "Why will she?" "Her hair is all done up in curl-papers."

MR. DECKER had been entertaining a party of his friends in the parlour, and the aroma of their cigars still lingered in the curtains. Mrs. Decker was naturally disgusted when she came into the room. She threw the windows open, and remarked,—"Well, it is all very well to talk about this new smokeless powder, but I don't see why somebody hasn't gumption enough to invent a smokeless tobacco."

HE was recently admitted to a hearing at one of the first lyrical theatres. He sang, and at the third or fourth note the manager stopped him. "There, that will do," he said; "leave me your address. I will bear you in mind in case of emergency!" "But what do you call a case of emergency?" "Well, supposing my theatre got on fire." "Eh?" "Yes; I should engage you to sing out 'Fire! fire!'"

FROM a French journal comes this little anecdote of a tutor and his royal pupil. The lesson was in Roman history, and the prince was unprepared. "We come now to the Emperor Caligula. What do you know about him, prince?" The question was followed by a silence that was becoming awkward when it was broken by the diplomatic tutor. "Your highness is right," he said, "perfectly right. The less said about this emperor the better."

"PROFESSOR," said Miss Skylight, "I want you to suggest a course in life for me. I have thought of journalism." "What are your natural inclinations?" "Oh, my soul yearns and throbs and pulsates with an ambition to give to the world a life-work that shall be marvellous in its scope and weirdly entrancing in the vastness of its structural beauty." "Woman, you're born to be a milliner."

THE widower had married again, and his choice was a wealthy lady about fifty years of age. When the bride and bridegroom returned home from the wedding, the husband, introducing the wife to the children, said: "My dear children, kiss this lady. She is the new mamma I promised to bring you." After taking a steady look at the "new mamma," little Charlie said: "Pa, you have been cheated! She isn't new at all!"

THE story is told that a woman had a very fashionable silk bodice made, which she sent to her sister in a little western town. She received in reply a letter of thanks, in which the sister said that she found the sleeves much larger than her thin arms needed, and had cut them over, getting enough out to make her five-year-old girl a dress. "You must have thought I had awful fat arms," the sister wrote.

THE story-writer had been out very late, and when he arrived home explained his tardiness at length and with great minuteness. His wife listened without comment until the end. "Well," he said, after a gloomy pause, "doesn't that explanation satisfy you?" "Perfectly," she replied. "It was lovely. Only, John dear, I think it is very extravagant of you to squander so much originality outside of your business."

AN Irish car driver was called upon to settle a wager which turned upon his ability to answer any question that was put to him without stopping to think. The circumstances having been explained to the man, he said, "Be after askin' me the question, your honour." "Well, now, Pat, tell me what's nothing?" "Arrah, now, shut your eyes and ye'll see nothing immediately," was the instant and brilliant answer.

A CARPENTER, sent to make some repairs on a private house, entered the apartment of the lady of the house with his apprentice. "Mary," the lady called to her servant, "see that my jewel case is locked at once!" The carpenter understood. He removed his watch and chain from his waistcoat with a significant air, and gave them to his apprentice. "John," he said, "take these back to the shop. It seems that the house isn't safe."

STILL IN THE HONEYMOON.—Angelina: And you won't forget to buy a tin of cocoanina! (Edwin ties a knot in his pocket-handkerchief). Angelina: And you won't forget to call and see dear mamma! (Edwin ties another knot in his pocket handkerchief). Angelina: And oh, Edwin, dear, you won't, you won't forget to think sometimes of your poor little wife, left all alone for the day! (Edwin ties a third knot in his pocket handkerchief).

THE Scotch Keeper has but little consideration for the feelings of the amateur sportsman. A novice from the South was out on a moor in the West Highlands the other day, and having unsuccessfully fired twice at a covey of birds that rose less than twenty yards ahead, he exclaimed excitedly, "It's strange that none of them fell; I'm positive some of them must have struck." "I dinna doot," returned the Keeper, with a sarcastic grin, "that they were struck wi' astonishment at gettin' aff so easy."

FATHER-IN-LAW: "What! Only six months married and looking so heavy-hearted! What's the matter?" Son-in-law: "Well, to tell the truth, married life hasn't turned out quite as exhilarating as it promised. In fact, it's been quite a failure." Father-in-law: "That all comes, my dear boy, from your failing to wholly obey my injunction." Son-in-law: "What was that?" Father-in-law: "Have you forgotten so soon? Don't you remember that when you came to ask me for my daughter I said to you, in the gravest of tones: 'Take her and be happy!' You took her all right, but have evidently slighted the last part of my injunction."

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SOCIETY.

THE coronation of the Czar and Czarita is to take place at Moscow in May next, and the fêtes in connection with the function will extend over about ten days. The Prince and Princess of Wales have been expressly invited to attend the coronation, which is to be a ceremony of surpassing splendour.

PRINCE CHARLES, to whom Princess Maud of Wales is now betrothed, is the second son of the King and Queen of Denmark, and he will be the first of the family to be married. His full name is Christian Frederick Charles George Waldemar Axel, and he is a Lieutenant in the Danish navy.

THE Empress Frederick, who is now staying at Trent, in the Tyrol, will not come to England until the end of January, when she is to be the guest of the Queen at Osborne, and afterwards at Windsor Castle. The Empress is to pay a visit to the Duke and Duchess of Sparta at Athens, either when she leaves the Tyrol or early in March after her departure from England.

PROVISION has been made for the growth of the Russian Imperial baby, and there are twelve dozen of every article in three sizes. The lawn used for many of them is so fine that the largest size of some, when folded, can conveniently be hidden in the hand. The bibs are varied in design, the prettiest being of embroidered lawn over piqué, or trimmed with gimp lace frilled on.

PRINCE and PRINCESS HENRY of PRUSSIA are going to spend the winter in Italy and Greece, and during their stay at Athens they will be the guests of the Duke and Duchess of Sparta, and are to pay a visit to Prince and Princess Louis of Battenberg at Malta. Prince and Princess Henry will return to Germany about the middle of April, when they are to meet the Queen at Coburg.

It is rumoured at Coburg that Hereditary Prince Alfred's betrothal to the Duchess Elsa of Württemberg is postponed until the spring, when Princess "Xandra," his sister, is to be married, and when many royal personages will assemble for the event. The last royal wedding at Coburg, that of the Grand Duke and Grand Duchess of Hesse, was the occasion of the betrothal of the Emperor and Empress of Russia.

THE Queen's drives, even in cold and wet weather, are nearly always taken in an open carriage, and she seldom returns to Balmoral until after dark. Her Majesty, however, is so warmly clothed (having regular suits of flannel garments for drives on cold days), and is so thoroughly protected by a mountain of rugs, that she can afford to regard the weather with indifference, particularly as it is the special business of one of her Highland servants, who sits behind the carriage, to hold an enormous umbrella over her head during the drive.

THE Queen will proceed to the Continent about the middle of March for six weeks. Her Majesty had contemplated a visit to the Eastern Riviera, which has been for many years a favourite district with the Empress Frederick; but it is now probable that the Queen will go back to Cimiez and again occupy the Grand Hotel, where she was so comfortable last year. Nothing is yet positively settled, but in any case the Queen will return to England through Germany, as she is to spend ten days at Coburg on her way home.

THE engagement of Prince Charles of Denmark and Princess Maud of Wales has met with the cordial approval of all their relatives, and the Princess of Wales is particularly gratified, this being a marriage for which she has long been anxious. Prince Charles, who is a universal favourite, is amiable, unassuming, and intelligent, and he has great charm of manner. He will be very rich, for he is to inherit a considerable portion of his mother's fortune, which is estimated at four millions sterling. The young couple are to reside principally in Denmark, and it is probable that the chateau of Sorgenfri, famous for its fine gardens, will be assigned as a country house.

STATISTICS.

THE average walking pace of a healthy man or woman is said to be seventy-five steps a minute.

MICROSCOPISTS are now able to see and measure objects no larger than the 300,000th of an inch.

THE number of public lamps lighted nightly in England and Wales is somewhere about 300,000.

It is estimated by gardeners that in the course of a season a frog or a toad will devour 57 times its weight in insects.

THE prime of life in a man of regular habits and sound constitution is from 30 to 55 years of age; of a woman, from 24 or 25 to about 40 years of age.

GEMS.

ADVICE is seldom welcome; those who need it most like it least.

It is not true that love makes all things easy; it makes us choose what is difficult.

THERE are two ways of getting rich: One by adding to our possessions; the other by diminishing our desires. The latter is much the easier and readier.

THE weakest living creature, by concentrating his powers on a single object, can accomplish something; the strongest, by dispersing his over many, may fail to accomplish anything.

THE very consciousness of having faithfully and cheerfully striven to do the work given us, whether it be open and active or secret and passive, brings with it a certain sense of success which compensates for failure.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

AMERICAN COOKIES.—Thin, rich cookies are made of one cup of butter, one cup of sugar, and three eggs. Beat these all to a cream, and add enough flour to mix. Roll them very thin, and bake in a quick oven.

PEACH BUTTER.—Pare ripe peaches and put them in a preserving kettle, with water sufficient to boil them soft; then put through a colander, removing the stones. To each quart of stewed fruit add one and one-half pounds of sugar, and boil very slowly one hour. Stir often, and be careful not to let it burn. Put in stone or glass jars and keep in a cool place.

GRAPE CATCHUP.—Take twelve pounds of ripe grapes, pick from the stems, wash, put in a preserve kettle with a pint of water, let them come to a boil, mash and mix. Take from the fire, strain, put back in the kettle with five pounds of sugar, and one quart of vinegar. Let it boil until thick, flavour with cloves and cinnamon, take from the fire, bottle and seal.

CRAB APPLE PUDDING.—Take one quart of crab apples, well cored, place over the fire with one pint of sugar, and three cups of cold water; cook until clear and thick. Place in a deep pudding dish, and pour over a batter made as follows: One-fourth of a cup of butter, one cup of sweet milk, two eggs, a spoonful of baking powder, and flour to make a thin batter. Bake one hour. Serve with sweetened whipped cream.

SPICE COOKIES.—Take one-half cup of lard, one-half cup of butter, one large cup of brown sugar, one cup of water, one teaspoonful of cinnamon, one-half teaspoonful of cloves, one-half teaspoonful of nutmeg. Then stir in one quart of flour, and one and a-half teaspoonfuls of baking powder. Rub the lard, butter and sugar to a smooth paste, then stir in the flour and powder into a firm dough, roll thin, bake ten minutes in hot oven.

MISCELLANEOUS.

SCHNEFLOWER stalks are now converted into paper.

THE Pacific is fully a mile deeper than any other ocean.

It is the iron in clay that gives the ordinary brick its red colour.

ON very dark nights a white light can be seen farther than any other colour.

IN Switzerland a society has long been formed for the preservation of wild flowers.

TUSK of the mammoth have been found a length of nine feet, measured along the curve.

THE leather apron worn by the modern blacksmith is mentioned by Pliny as in use in his time.

THE oldest national flag in the world is that of Denmark, which has been in use since the year 1219.

WHEN a Dutch maidservant wishes to go to a dance, and has no swain of her own, she hires a cavalier for the occasion.

NEARLY all of the forms of lower life dislike tobacco. It is reserved for mankind to appreciate this plant.

THE income of the industrial population of Great Britain has grown in fifty years three times faster than the population itself.

THE nerves of warm-blooded animals telegraph information to their brains at the rate of about 150ft. per second.

TULIPS are so sensitive to the light that during a cloudy day they will often close their petals, and remain shut up until a return of sunlight.

A SEAWEED of the South Pacific often grows to be 30 in. or 40 in. in diameter, and 1,500 ft. to 2,000 ft. in length. It has no root in the proper sense, the nourishment being absorbed from the water.

IN Florida the cucumber is regarded as an excellent bee plant. It is said bees favour it, and that the honey prepared from cucumber flowers is of first-class quality. Cucumber pollen is also said to be a favourite with the honey-bee.

THE salaries paid to many French cooks by nobility for merely superintending the gastronomic arrangements of their establishments are preposterous; five or six hundred pounds a year is very common, and frequently a thousand pounds is given.

WHEN a person in the Soudan is bitten by a dog supposed to be suffering from the rabies, the animal is instantly caught, cut open; the liver is taken out and slightly browned by being held to the fire, after which the whole of the organ is eaten by the patient.

THE oldest paper money is the "flying money," or "convenient money," first issued in China 2697 B.C. The early Chinese notes were in all essentials similar to the modern bank-notes, bearing the name of the bank, the date of the issue, the number of the note, the signature of the official issuing it, indications of its value in figures, in words, and in pictorial representations of coins or heaps of coin equal in amount to its full value, and a notice of the pains and penalties for counterfeiting. Over and above all was a laconic exhortation to industry and thrift: "Produce all you can; spend with economy." The notes were printed in blue ink on paper made from the fibre of the mulberry-trees.

THE smoke from the burning of resinous wood has very powerful deodorizing and disinfecting properties. Many doctors now prescribe creosote, or oil of smoke, made by burning the wood of the eucalyptus tree, as a preventive of disease. In the forest of resinous trees the air is filled with the odours which come from decompositions or slow burning. Thus the great Dismal Swamp of North Carolina, though filled with stagnant water, is remarkably free from diseases that owe their origin to miasma and malaria. In cases of sickness it is a help, to guard against infection, to burn small pieces of resinous wood, and allow its smoke to mix with the atmosphere in the house.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

- E. J.—The cactuses grow wild only in America.
- W. B. W.—Apply at whatever prison you prefer.
- LARRY.—There is no public institution of the sort.
- ERIC.—To the registrar of the place where you were born.
- EVA.—Celery is never pickled, it might be done as you do onions.
- INQUIRITIVE.—He was not sufficiently famous to find a place in public annals.
- T. B.—The prison funds go into the general fund for the maintenance of prisons.
- INQUIRER.—It would be quite against our rules to recommend any one in particular.
- VAL.—As the work is out of print your only chance would be at second-hand bookstalls.
- TOBY.—Take it to a dealer and ask him to name a price; we do not attempt valuations.
- AMBITIOUS.—You certainly could not do it yourself unless you had more knowledge of the art.
- H. C.—On paying a shilling fee you can see a copy of the will, if one was left, at Somerset House.
- INJURED.—You could do so, but you would have to prove actual monetary loss to obtain damages.
- HUMOUR.—If you have the name of the asylum the proper person to write to is, of course, the superintendent.
- ANXIOUS TO KNOW.—There are no assisted passages being offered at present to emigrants to any British colony.
- PHILIP.—A raw potato will remove mud marks from black clothes. It should be cut in half, and rubbed on the marks.
- S. T.—Iron anchors were first used by the Greeks. It is in China that crooked wooden anchors are still made use of.
- CURIOS.—The meaning is that mothers, by the influence they exercise on their children, direct the destinies of mankind.
- ANNA.—Rinse in cold water, wash in hot soap-suds, and when cool, fill with water into which you have put a pinch of soda.
- IGNORANCE.—The man appears to have been within his legal rights; he brought all the trouble on yourself by withholding the rent.
- REGULAR READER.—A shopkeeper is absolute master of the whole contents of his shop, and need not sell to anyone except at his pleasure.
- BREVE.—It is recommended to use water with a small portion of washing soda dissolved in it, and some sand. Soap is said to discolour marble.
- V. R. C.—The only cure for rats is cement. If the floor were taken up and the holes covered with cement there would be an end to the trouble.
- ERUPTIVE.—It is neither proper nor correct to use the appellation in question. It originated, you may be sure, outside of good society, and should be kept there.
- ONE WHO WANTS TO KNOW.—An "édition de luxe" of a work is a specially fine edition, prepared upon special paper and bound in some particularly special way.
- KATHIE.—The mottoes, "Dieu et mon droit," and "Honi soit qui mal y pense," are French; the first signifies "God and my right;" the second, "Evil be to him that evil thinks."
- PLAGUED.—Soft soap and cayenne pepper made into a paste and applied to cracks, crevices, and interstices of woodwork, walls, floors, and furniture, have in some instances been found beneficial.
- IGNORANT.—It certainly will not do for you to think of marrying again under the circumstances. Yours is a very hard case, but a divorce or judicial separation is the only thing that would set you free.
- VERY ANXIOUS.—You might write to the Immigration officer at the port you mention, giving your relative's name and saying when he went out and by what ship; he will cause inquiry to be made about him.
- S. K.—Cantharides, or Spanish flies, is insoluble in water. Cold water dissolves it slightly, hot alcohol freely. Unless prescribed by a physician let it alone. Any drugist will enlighten you further upon the subject.
- FRANK.—The quotation, "Heaven tempers the wind to the shorn lamb" is of uncertain origin; it is found in many languages, and would almost seem to have had as many origins; no one can point to the original source.
- HENRIETTA.—If they are iron pots, boil some cabbage leaves and potato skins in them for a good while, then wash with plenty of soap and water, then thoroughly rinse in hot water and dry; tinned pans only require to be thoroughly washed in soap and water, and then rinsed and dried.
- PUZZLED.—We do not "miss a leap year in every hundred," every fourth century, counting from 2,000, is a leap year; the arrangement is necessary to keep our time reckoning right with the actual period taken by the earth to go round the sun; the thing was finally regulated by Act of Parliament.

IMPORTANT TO NEWSAGENTS.

The Trade are reminded that the LONDON READER is now supplied on SALE or RETURN. Such returns to be made WITHIN THREE WEEKS OF DATE OF PUBLICATION. This does not apply to the Christmas Number.

CHRISTMAS DOUBLE NUMBER OF THE "LONDON READER."

(PRICE TWOPENCE.)

AT NEXT TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 26th, WITH NO. 1701, WILL BE PUBLISHED OUR EXTRA CHRISTMAS NUMBER, CONTAINING THE CHARMING COMPLETE STORY, FULL OF INTEREST, ENTITLED

I Saw Three Ships Come Sailing In.

A NEW SERIAL STORY ALSO COMMENCES IN THIS NUMBER.

With Attractive Poetry, Seasonable Paragraphs, and a Fund of Witty and Humorous Gatherings, in addition to the Ordinary Attractions.

BALDRHEAD.—Possibly the best thing you can do with it is to wash it frequently with a little borax in the water; some people find that by rubbing pure paraffin oil into the roots, scented, of course, they start a new growth of hair; you might try that.

THE TENDER HEART.

She gazed upon the burnished brace
Of plump ruffed grouse he showed with pride;
Angelic grief was in her face:
"How could you do it, dear?" she sighed.
"The poor, pathetic, motionless wings!
The songs all hushed—oh, cruel shame!"
Said he: "The partridge never sings."
Said she: "The sin is quite the same."
"You men are savage through and through,
A boy is always bringing in
Some string of birds' eggs, white and blue,
Or better upon a pin.
The single worm in angulish dies,
Impaled the pretty trout to tease—"
"My own, I fish for trout with flies—"
"Don't wander from the question, please!"

She quoted Burns' "Wounded Hare,"
And certain burning lines of Blake's,
And Ruskin on the fowls of air,
And Coleridge on the water-snakes.
At Emerson's "Forbearance" she
Began to feel his will benumbed;
At Browning's "Donald" utterly
His soul surrendered and succumbed.

"Oh, gentiest of all gentle girls,"
He thought, "beneath the blessed sun!"
He saw her lashes hung with pearls,
And swore to give away his gun.
She smiled to find her point was gained,
And went with happy parting words
(He subsequently ascertained).
To trim her hat with humming-birds.

ISABEL.—The suitor referred to should be made to understand that his trifling must come to an end, sooner or later, and the sooner the better. It is contemptible on the part of any man to be in the way of other suitors.

J. S. C.—Take half a pound of bruised sarsaparilla, two ounces orange peel, half an ounce of liquorice root, two ounces of sassafras, and one gallon of water. Boil all down to half a gallon, and add one pound of sugar to every pint of liquor.

ONE WHO WOULD LIKE TO KNOW.—If time permits, and your mistress requests you to do a little needlework, we do not see how you can object. There is no rule, so far as we know; it is more a matter of arrangement than anything else. Many thanks for your good wishes.

CLAUDE.—No manager of a theatre will form an engagement with an untied performer, unless he have extraordinary confidence in his powers; and then even it would merely be an engagement dependent on the success he might achieve, liable to be dissolved in case of failure.

A. W.—It must be taken to pieces and boiled for a considerable time, then dried, picked out, and when perfectly dry and aired, make up again. Constant airing and beating up will prevent them settling in it. A good sprinkling now and then of powdered camphor and pepper keeps them again.

WIMFRED.—The introduction of physical exercises in our public schools has done much to improve the general health and develop the frames of the pupils, and so long as the exercises are not carried to such an excess as to become wearisome they cannot fail to continue to be productive of good.

B. S. J.—You can make a transfer paper by rubbing one side of thin post or tissue paper with either powdered vermilion, red chalk, or black lead. When the powder is rubbed well over the surface, then take a clean rag, and with it carefully rub off all the excess of coloured powder.

N. M.—It may be so in some respects, but taken altogether it is something worthy of acquirement and we all take pride in it. Far be it from our intention to favour anything superficial in preference to solid attainments; but others, like yourself, are too prone to undervalue accomplishments of any kind, forgetting that without them life would be very prosaic.

ANNICE.—Place in a porcelain kettle four pounds of sugar, one quart of vinegar, one ounce of stick cinnamon, and half an ounce of cloves. When the contents have come to a boil add eight pounds of the fruit, previously peeled, and cook until tender. Skim out the fruit and put into glass jars. Then pour over them the syrup, which should be boiled very thick.

G. L.—Put a few drops of nitric acid in a teaspoonful of water, touch the stain with a feather dipped in the mixture; and the instant the ink disappears rub well with a rag wetted in cold water to remove all trace of the acid, which if left on will leave a white mark; the place cleansed should then be polished with some furniture paste. The operation needs care and quickness of action.

RATHER DUBIOUS.—The fact that lately you have begun to "tolerate" your admirer indicates that your feelings toward him have undergone some change, and that it is quite possible that you may yet requite his love. He certainly deserves praise for his uniform courtesy and generous treatment. We note nothing in your description of his person that should militate against him.

THOUGHTFUL.—There are some persons who are naturally fickle. They like all people, and rarely seem to care more for one than another. There are others who have formed a habit of inconsistency. They are sometimes selfish, vain and given to caring more for their own enjoyment than for the pleasure of those with whom they associate. It is safe to say that sincere, unselfish and considerate people are rarely fickle.

THE LONDON READER, Post-free. Three-halfpence Weekly; or Quarterly, One Shilling and Eightpence.

ALL BACK NUMBERS, PARTS AND VOLUMES are in print, and may be had of all Booksellers.

NOTICE.—Part 41, Now Ready, price Sixpence, post-free, Eightpence. Also Vol. LXV., bound in cloth, 4s. 6d.

THE INDEX to Vol. LXV. is Now Ready; Price One Penny, post-free, Three-halfpence.

ALL LETTERS TO BE ADDRESSED TO THE EDITOR OF THE LONDON READER, 224, Strand, W.C.

††† We cannot undertake to return rejected manuscripts.

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LONDON READER

CHRISTMAS NUMBER

WITH NO. 1701.—VOL. LXVI.]

FOR THE WEEK ENDING DECEMBER 7, 1895.

[PRICE TWOPENCE.]

Christmas Time.

—107—

ONCE again old Christmas comes,
To crown the closing year
With holidays and happy homes,
And gifts, and goodly cheer.

Old Christmas, with his icy breath,
And out-door garb of snow,
Within puts on the holly wreath,
And bids the yule log glow.

We hail his presence, for he brings
Our absent loved ones near;
And every joy bell that he rings
Is music to the ear.

Music that tells of "peace on earth,"
Peace, and "good will to men,"
Wrought out by Him whose wondrous
birth
We celebrate again.

And "glory unto God most high!"
Whose Son, in mercy given,
For us was born, for us to die,
That we might live in heaven.

Hail festive season! joyfully
We welcome thee once more:
Still shall thy coming greeted be,
As 'twas in days of yore.

For nearly nineteen centuries,
In regal annual state,
Thou hast brought hallowed memories
To humble and to great.

Dear memories of that olden time
When, with their offerings sweet,
The wise men of an eastern clime
Kneeled at Emmanuel's feet.

Wise, for they followed from afar
To Bethlehem's manger bed,
The guiding of that Heaven-sent star,
Which to the Saviour led.

And myrrh, and frankincense, and
gold,
Before the Child outpoured,
In whom faith taught them to behold
The everlasting Lord.

And may we ne'er forget to raise,
From hearts of grateful love,
The sweeter frankincense of praise,
Up to His throne above!

I Saw Three Ships come Sailing In.

CHAPTER I.

It was Christmas Eve, and the drawing-room at Sotham Court was the scene of a strange gathering. Some twelve or fifteen people sat there in a state of anxious expectation. They were not Christmas guests, for no thought of the festive season had brought them there. In a certain sense the chief guest of them could not be called a guest at all, for only one had come at the invitation of the owner of the Court, and his errand was purely a business one. The others had arrived on hearing that Lady Linton was dangerously ill, because—Heaven forgive their covetousness!—she was a rich woman, and had very many things she could not take with her on her last long journey, and all her relations cherished a faint hope of being her heir.

The one man at the Court by Lady Linton's request was a clerk from her lawyer's office. Messrs. Finch & Heron had not cared to devote their own Christmas Eve to obeying a death-bed summons, even though it came from an old and valued client. Dermot Rutherford was a fully qualified solicitor, and quite capable of making Lady Linton's last will, so he was told off to the errand—and hated it.

Dermot was only twenty-six, but had already seen much of the seamy side of human nature. Yet to sit in the beautiful room which its owner had made lovely with every ornament taste could suggest and wealth purchase—to know that all the people—her own flesh and blood, mind—gathered there literally grudged her her last hours on earth, because they were in a hurry to hasten home and yet would not leave the Court while her life lingered—all this filled Dermot with a sense of repulsion and bitterness such as he had never felt before.

Lady Linton was a childless widow. He was not aware of the exact degree

in which the people round him claimed kinship with her, but he did know, and despised them for it, that most of them had come up to him and tried to ascertain the nature of his business. Was Lady Linton going to make another will at the eleventh hour, or why did she need a lawyer's presence when she was dying?

Dermot had repulsed them civilly but decidedly, and now they all sat a little aloof, eyeing him askance and glancing continually at the door by which they expected news to come from the sick room. It opened at last, and a pleasant-faced woman, in the garb of a hospital nurse, entered. She went straight to Mr. Rutherford.

"Lady Linton is awake and would like to see you now."

The whole army of relatives rose from their seats as though the invitation had included them.

"Lady Linton can see no one but this gentleman," said the nurse pointedly; "but she is a little easier now, and Dr. Warner thinks she will live through the night. Perhaps you would like to go home?" suggested the nurse as a parting shot before she and Dermot left the room.

She led the way up a broad staircase to a door before which velvet curtains were drawn. She pushed these aside and entered, followed by Dermot. He had seen Lady Linton several times on her visits to the office, and was surprised to find her outwardly little changed. She was not even in bed, but lying on a sofa drawn close to the fire, a lace cap on her pretty white hair and a silken coverlid over her. He thought at first the doctors must surely be mistaken. Then he noticed the panting breath, and realized it was true. Lady Linton was really dying.

"You must not talk much," said the doctor kindly. "Try and make this interview as short as possible."

The old lady smiled.

"When one is as near death as I am, Doctor, what one does matters very little. You might go down and reassure my dear relations. Nurse will keep guard over my door."

Left alone with Dermot she asked anxiously, "You have brought them?"

"Yes." He took six folded papers, sealed and securely fastened, from his bag. They were one and all Lady Linton's will. She had made a new will pretty often in the last ten years, and from some caprice would never suffer any of the old ones to be destroyed, but insisted on their remaining in the lawyer's keeping.

"Six," she said, with interest; "you are sure they are all there?"

"Every one."

"Then read me the one I made two years ago. . . . I think it will do, but I had better hear it."

It was the shortest of them all, having been made during a sudden illness which threatened to prove fatal. By it Lady Linton provided amply for her servants, and left a handsome legacy to Dr. Warner and Mr. Finch, finally devising Sotham Court and the whole of her possessions to them, to hold in trust for the eldest child of her step-daughter, Dorothy Linton, whether son or daughter, the said child to enjoy the property for life, with entail to their eldest son. And should it be proved the said Dorothy Linton died childless, the whole fortune was to be realized and distributed between certain charities fully named.

Lady Linton listened while Dermot read the contents of the will in a clear, distinct voice.

"That will do," she said, slowly. "At least, it is justice. . . . Now burn the others—burn them before my eyes."

He obeyed her, wondering, in spite of himself, how it came about that among all her kindred there seemed no one near her heart.

Lady Linton looked at him shrewdly.

"You think I must be a very disagreeable old woman to have no friends. That crew downstairs are not friends, but harpies."

"I was thinking," he confessed, "it must be wretched to be ill alone."

"To die alone," she corrected. "Well, Mr. Rutherford, you have your life before you. Take an old woman's warning. I chose money and trampled love under my feet. For fifty years I have had all that money could give me, but I have never known what love was. Money can't buy love. It can't even buy one disinterested friend. . . . I threw away the substance for the shadow; mind you don't do the same!"

Dermot felt bewildered. That he should be sitting alone with a dying woman who warned him against caring for money was passing strange, seeing that for the first time in his life he was soon to be thrown into the society of an heiress.

"I mustn't keep you," said Lady Linton, grimly. "It's Christmas Eve.

You'll be wanting to go to a dance or a theatre instead of sitting with a dying woman."

"I am going straight home when I leave here," said Dermot, "and no festivity awaits me. We are not a cheerful family, Lady Linton."

"Are you married?"

"I am not even engaged. Matrimony is a luxury which costs money."

"You've a handsome face," said the old lady, which made Dermot blush, "and you don't look likely to be a bachelor. You'll marry right enough, and remember love wears better than gold. I should like to give your wife a present."

It was in vain Dermot protested he had not a wife—might, indeed, never have one. Lady Linton rang a small hand-bell, which brought Nurse Mary instantly to her side.

"I want to give this young gentleman a Christmas present," said Lady Linton. "Bring me my jewel case."

Dermot followed the nurse, and managed to repeat his protest in a low tone.

"Why should she not have the pleasure?" asked Nurse Mary, in a whisper. "She is perfectly in her right mind, and there are so few people she cares to please. Don't cross the wishes of the dying."

The jewel case was brought, and Lady Linton's dying fingers selected a diamond ring—a half hoop, with flashing gems of the first water.

"You will give it your bride from me," she said, "or," in a gentler tone, "maybe, if you are going to begin life humbly and she does not care for jewels, it would furnish your house."

She slipped it on to his little finger. It was impossible to refuse a gift thus offered, and Dermot, indeed, had no notion of the ring's value. Diamonds were not familiar objects to him, and he could not guess that, instead of the ten or twenty pounds he would have suggested as its price, Lady Linton's gift had cost many hundreds.

"Good-bye," said Lady Linton. "I hope you will have a happy Christmas. Mine will be the first happy one I have known for fifty years. Take care of my will. I shouldn't sleep in my grave if it were lost."

Sotham Court was some twenty miles from London, and near a railway station; so Dermot reached Boston in about an hour, and driving at once in a cab to the Temple, deposited Lady Linton's will in the iron safe. It would probably have been quite secure in his own keeping, but with the recollection of the dying woman's eagerness he would not neglect any precaution. All the clerks had long since left, for it was past seven; and Dermot, beginning at last to realize that he was hungry, turned into a restaurant in the Strand and ordered a meal—nothing dainty or expensive, merely a cup of tea and a plate of cold meat, for, as Mr. Rutherford had hinted to Lady Linton, he was very far from rich; how far, in fact, very few people knew who saw him only at the office.

Dermot was the eldest of a large family, and owed his articles to Mr. Finch's generosity, the lawyer being his god-father. Although he had passed his "final," he was still a clerk, and likely to remain one, for he had no money to buy a partnership, and no influential friends likely to introduce clients if he made a bold stroke and set up for himself.

He received a hundred and thirty pounds a year, of which he contributed one half to the parental purse in consideration of partial board and very indifferent lodgings. With the rest he provided his clothes, season ticket, and week-day dinners, the very small margin these left being invariably borrowed of him for home debts.

The word "borrowed" was the one chosen by Mr. Rutherford, senior; but as that gentleman had never repaid a loan in his life, he was hardly likely to begin when the lender was his own son. And so Dermot had not the faintest hope of seeing any of his advances again.

He was thinking of this and other domestic problems as he discussed his tea, and felt as unfestive and as little in harmony with the joyousness of the season as had done the watchers in Lady Linton's drawing-room.

Long ago Dermot had had to make a fierce stand on two points: he would never "lend his name" to his father; and the personal expenses necessary to his position in the Temple must be provided before his purse was at the disposal of his family.

To ensure this he always paid for his season ticket in January, and ordered a complete outfit in June.

His father never reproached him for this precaution, confessing it would be a dire calamity if he lost his post at Messrs. Finch and Heron's. But all the same, Dermot knew his glossy hat and well-fitting frock coat made a painful contrast to the equipment of the rest of the family.

Mr. Rutherford, senior, was always addressed as "Captain." He really had been in the army once upon a time, and had enjoyed that rank; but as he had sold out years before, he had not the slightest claim to the title. However, it pleased him and cost nothing, while it had the advantage of distinguishing him from his son as Dermot grew up.

The Rutherfords lived at Norwood—not Upper Norwood, where rents are high—but a remoter district, where some years ago speculative builders built so far ahead of the requirements of the population that houses have been cheap there ever since.

It really had some prefix before it, but it was not "West" Norwood or "South." It was about three miles from the Crystal Palace, which did not prevent Mrs. Rutherford, when she tried for lodgers, advertising her apartments as "close to the Palace."

This lady was not Dermot's mother, though he loved her dearly. Captain Rutherford had married again, after such a brief experience of widowerhood that there was no perceptible gap between any of his children, and strangers found it difficult to guess where the first family ended and the second began.

Mrs. Rutherford was a woman in a thousand. She taught the children, cooked the dinner, made and mended the family clothes with equal skill.

But, alas! there was a limit to her powers. She could not make money. Given an income, however limited, and no woman in England would have made it go further. But, poor soul, this was the extent of her accomplishments. To earn any sum, however small, was beyond her.

As he drank his tea, Dermot reflected that probably the master (her name with the whole tribe) was even then buying to-morrow's dinner cheap at one of the large poulterers' in the Borough.

Mrs. Rutherford believed in taking a third-class ticket to "the Elephant," and bargaining on Saturday nights. She often returned with really splendid fare; but the habit chafed on Dermot's pride. He would rather have dined off boiled mutton, bought in the ordinary way. Although he had always lived in this harem seclusion way, it was not congenial to him. Tradespeople calling daily for orders, a neat cook and housemaid, with all the regularity of a suburban life, as approved by Mrs. Grundy, would have been his ideal.

And now a wonderful thing was going to befall the family at Stoneleigh (Stoneleigh was a ten-roomed house at thirty pounds a year, but it made up for its cheapness by the grandeur of its name). They were actually going to have an heiress entrusted to their care for six months. Dermot was painfully conscious they were the last people in the world suitable for the task, but it had come about without any seeking of their own.

A certain Geoffrey Doyle had, years before, been a boon companion and friend of Captain Rutherford, but growing tired of poverty, he emigrated, married a colonial heiress, and made a fortune.

Now and again at rare intervals he had written to his quondam comrade, and finally the news of his death had reached the Captain, with the request that his only child might find a home with his chum's family for six months, or until she felt sufficiently at home in England to decide on her plans. A firm of lawyers who had the management of Mr. Doyle's affairs would pay whatever sum Mrs. Rutherford thought right for Vana's expenses, and before the letter reached Norwood she would be on her way.

It was of this Dermot was thinking as he loitered over his tea. Personally, he had been dead against Miss Doyle's joining their family circle. He felt that the kind of life they perforce led through his father's embarrassments was not at all desirable for an heiress. He had also a nameless fear that Captain Rutherford, whose pride did not seem to increase with his misfortunes, might accept, or even solicit, material aid from the rich young woman suddenly brought into his house.

From Stoneleigh Dermot's thoughts fled to Lady Linton and her strange gift. He supposed the ring was really lawfully his. From some nameless fear he slipped it off his finger and placed it carefully away in his pocket-book.

What would be the fate of that trinket? Would it ever fulfil the giver's intention, and rest on the finger of his wife? Hardly. In the first place, he had no thought of taking a wife; in the next, whenever he married his partner would be a very humble person, mistress, at most, of an eight-roomed house, and quite unequal to the honour of wearing diamonds.

At last Dermot rose leisurely and walked towards Ludgate Hill station. He was by nature a home-loving man, but though he was very fond of his family, Stoneleigh was so antagonistic to his tastes that he was always willing to defer the time for his return there. He had never heard anything of his own mother's family; he was but six years old when she died. But from the positive pain he felt at the straits and contrivance practised at Stoneleigh, he always had a conviction his mother had come of very different stock, and he must have inherited her love of English decorum and quiet, substantial comfort, along with his father's handsome face and Irish grace of manner.

"I do think," was his reflection, as he seated himself in a second-class railway carriage, "if anyone settled a small regular income on the governor, he wouldn't thank them. He'd lose the greatest excitement of his life if he hadn't to wonder sometimes where his next sovereign was coming from."

CHAPTER II.

STONELEIGH stood in an unfrequented road about ten minutes' walk from West Heath station. Everyone who lived in the neighbourhood called their abode "Norwood," so we will follow their example, first promising, however, that the substantial roads of Upper Norwood and the pleasant detached houses of Gipsy Hill would not have admitted the right of the poorer locality near West Heath station to claim connection with them.

To return. Stoneleigh stood in an unfinished road—probably the thoroughfare never would be completed. A building society owned most of the ground, and for some reason it had not flourished lately. Stoneleigh itself was the property of a cook who had invested her savings in it on the strength of a pamphlet entitled "Buy your own house and pay no rent." Probably the cook had bitterly regretted her bargain, for as the house had been empty for three years before the advent of the Rutherfords, she must have found it a dead loss. How did she get her rent? Dermot saw that, subtracting the amount from his own payments, and so perhaps she was not so disposed to blame the Captain as were his butcher, and baker, and candlestick maker.

Stoneleigh was a cut above the usual suburban villa in that it was double-fronted and built entirely on two floors. It looked out on to a piece of waste ground, and was miserably deficient in the matter of paint, the palings and the front door rivalling each other in their need for this desirable but expensive article.

Within, papering and whitewashing were eminently required, but the cook, being tired of her investment, would not; and the Captain, by reason of his poverty, could not provide either, so the house went without. The furniture was chiefly noticeable as being "odd,"—it had, indeed, most of it been picked up at sales. Nothing matched; nothing, even by a strong sense of imagination, could be supposed to match; there was nothing that could have

been done without, and, indeed, Stoneleigh lacked many things an ordinary housewife would have thought indispensable.

While Dermot still lingered over tea his stepmother and Kathleen, the eldest girl, held a hurried confab in the drawing-room—they kept up names at Stoneleigh, most of their meals were taken in this front parlour, but it was still called the drawing-room, just as a little slip opposite the front door, where no one had ever eaten so much as a biscuit, was known as the breakfast-room.

Kathleen was just twenty. Like Dermot, she possessed the beauty of her Irish ancestors, and, unlike him, she had inherited something of their temperament. Dermot was grave and almost too staid for so young a man, but Kathleen could laugh at a joke, even if her pocket and the larder were alike empty, and the unwelcome demon of hunger possessed the whole family.

"I never thought it would come to this," said poor Mrs. Rutherford, wringing her hands. "What will Dermot say? Really, Katy, I quite dread the sound of his knock."

"We've feared something would happen for so long," retorted Katy, "that my only wonder is it did not come before. As to Dermot, he'll be awfully put out; but there, when he insisted on paying the rent himself he might just as well have thought of the taxes. The Queen is a most important person, and mustn't, on any account, be kept waiting."

For the fresh trouble at Stoneleigh was nothing more nor less than a man in possession, "put in" for the Queen's taxes. How many stages the matter had been through before the authorities took this final step is unknown. No doubt Captain Rutherford had tried their patience sorely. Still, the family had had hairbreadth escapes so often, the real wonder was—as Kathleen said—nothing had happened before.

The debt (for how long arrears did not appear) was for six pounds odd. As the whole resources of the establishment would not have made one golden sovereign, let alone half-a-dozen, there was nothing for it but to allow the elderly, civil-spoken, if rather untidy, man to descend to the kitchen, whence he assured Mrs. Rutherford he "knew a lady when he saw one, and if provided with his vittles and his pipe would trouble no one, and even lend a hand with the Christmas dinner if she liked to make him useful."

"The Christmas dinner, indeed!" said Mrs. Rutherford, sadly. "There won't be any now!"

But Katy had too much feeling for the children's expectations and her stepmother's own housewifely pride to agree to this, so (on the principle that Kathleen always bore the heaviest share of any burden) presently Mrs. Rutherford and the big market basket set out, leaving her step-daughter to explain matters to her father and—much harder task—Dermot when they returned.

If Dermot sometimes felt downhearted his sister had her full share of trouble. Try as she would to be impartial, Kathleen always felt torn in pieces between her brother and the others. On the one hand, Dermot worked hard, and was certainly entitled, for sixty-five pounds a year, to a great deal more comfort than he obtained. On the other, the happy-go-lucky family really winced when the young lawyer delivered one of his cold sarcastic criticisms of their goings-on.

Mrs. Rutherford would cry for days after Dermot had been roused to expostulate, and yet, seen in the light of those cold, clear blue eyes, no doubt the family *did* stand seriously in need of improvement.

"Dermot would be much happier in lodgings," Kathleen thought, for perhaps the twentieth time. "The shifts the others laugh at are just misery to him. Yet without Dermot to make us careful we should be ruined straight off. It will be dreadful to tell him about that man, but it must be done. Well, I am thankful of one thing: that we are not expecting Miss Doyle till next week. We could not hide the truth, and what would she think of us?"

Meanwhile the stalwart tones of the man in possession could be heard below as he conversed amicably with Bridget, the maid of all work; and Katy wished devoutly some of her family would return. With seven brothers and sisters solitude was rare, but the three little boys belonged to a church choir, and were even now singing carols under the superintendence of a devoted curate. Nora (the eldest of the second family) had gone skating with her father, and the two next girls were mercifully away on a visit to a school-fellow, having, in spite of their shabby clothes, invited them for Christmas.

No time had ever passed quite so slowly. Kathleen poked the fire into a brighter blaze, and looked anxiously at the clock. Half-past seven, and Dermot should have been home long ago! Nora and her father as likely as not had lingered to look in the gay shop windows on their return, but Dermot's delay was unaccountable. Katy wished he would come, though she dreaded the task of telling him of the man in possession. Profoundly ignorant of law, she did not know—even if her brother had such a sum in his pocket—whether the man was bound to depart the moment he received his money. She could not tell in the least if they would have to keep him until then, after Christmas, the business world resumed its work.

It was a fine frosty night, the moon was up, and the cloudless sky spangled by myriads of stars. The ground was hard and dry, so that every footstep sounded clearly on her ear. Not that there were many. Few people came up Eastcote Road, for only four of the houses were finished, and the tenants of these had not many visitors. Suddenly the sound of wheels fell on Kathleen's ear. She looked hurriedly out and saw a cab approaching. Her heart beat fast with fear. Had some accident happened to Dermot? Was he being brought home to her injured—perhaps dying?

Impelled by a nameless fear Kathleen went into the hall and opened the front door. Yes, the cab was actually stopping. Another moment and the driver alighted and came towards her.

"Is this Captain Rutherford's, miss?" he asked, civilly.

"Yes. What is the matter?" cried Kathleen. "Has there been any accident?"

But the man did not seem to hear her. Returning to the cab he flung open the door and handed out a small, graceful figure, who, with some direction to him which the wind bore away from Kathleen, came slowly up the steps.

"I am Vana Doyle," she said, simply. "Oh, how dreadfully cold it is, England must be a terrible place."

Poor Kathleen! Evidently the heiress had arrived a week before she was expected. This seemed the hardest stroke of fate. But hospitality compelled her to push aside her own worries and welcome the stranger.

"Miss Doyle! I am so sorry no one came to meet you, but we did not expect you till next week. Please come into the house out of the cold."

But Vana lingered to pay the cabman, which was perhaps as well, seeing Katy's purse was empty. Then Bridget appeared to help them with the luggage, and Katy, fearing the man in possession was looming in the distance ready to offer his assistance, drew Miss Doyle into the drawing-room.

"Please sit down," bringing forward a shabby arm chair; "you must be frozen."

Vana Doyle unfastened her fur-lined cloak and slipped off her small velvet hat. Then she stood before Kathleen revealed as a girl of peerless beauty, who somehow looked older than the "child" of whom Mr. Doyle had written so tenderly, and actually, though her father had not been dead more than two months, she was dressed in colours!

"He never could bear to see me in black," she said, perhaps noticing Kathleen's glance at her ruby cloth costume, "and mourning is such a mockery. No change of dress could make me miss him more."

"It must be very sad for you," said Katy, gently. "You have no relations at all, I think?"

"No. I had a companion who was very good to me. Papa wanted her to come to England with me, but she died the day before the vessel sailed."

"How very sad."

"Wasn't it?" asked Vana. "She was so pretty and devoted to me. When she left me I felt what it meant to be alone in the world."

"We will try and make you happy here," said Kathleen, kindly. "Papa is not rich, and we lead a very quiet life, but I hope you will try to feel at home with us."

"I am sure I shall," said Vana, sweetly. "Are you the only one? I thought Captain Rutherford had a large family?"

"He has four sons and four daughters, but every one is out to-night except me. I expect Dermot, my eldest brother, home every minute."

"Is he older than you?"

"Yes, six years. Now, Miss Doyle, if you will rest yourself I will go and speak to Bridget about your room and supper. I am sure you must be tired and hungry."

Fortunately Bridget was not one of the fugitive servants who never stay anywhere, but a valued family retainer who had lived with the Rutherfords since Nora's birth. She would "put up" with the stranger's sudden arrival just as she had already "put up" with the man in possession. She had heard all about Miss Doyle's advent, and knew just where Mrs. Rutherford meant her to sleep. So when Katy got upstairs she found Biddy struggling with a fire which threatened to smoke, and with a goodly array of sheets and blankets trying to air in front of it.

"She's a fine set-up young lady, Miss Katy," said the faithful woman; "but I wish she'd thought to send us a bit of a telegram. These sheets are cruelly damp."

"She won't be going to bed yet," said Kathleen, sagely. "She must have supper first. Bridget, is there anything?"

"There's bread and cheese in plenty, Miss Kathleen, but nothing else unless it's the sausages your ma bought for the turkey she hoped to get. I might frizzle them up in no time. Bread and cheese seems cold fare for a lady from Australia."

Mrs. Rutherford would mourn her sausages, but there really seemed no help for it, and hastily agreeing to Bridget's suggestion, Katy went back to the drawing-room, for she dreaded to leave her guest longer alone lest by any strange chance Miss Doyle should become aware of the unwelcome presence in the kitchen.

Vana sat just as she had left her in the big shabby old chair by the fire. She had taken off her hat, and the other girl looking at her unperceived, realized that her face was not so child-like as she had thought at first. The blue-black hair, the large flashing black eyes, the almost southern warmth of colouring were not in the least what Katy had expected from the unlovely photograph of a very plain child taken in Melbourne some ten years before, and sent to Captain Rutherford by his old friend, who little thought his precious gift would be consigned to a drawer of rubbish, and only unearthed hurriedly when the original of the photograph was expected at Stoneleigh, and the Rutherfords wondered what she would be like. No, they would never have expected such a beautiful creature from that old faded photograph, and yet, lovely as she was—the stranger—there was something in her face which jarred on Kathleen, just as Vana's lack of mourning array had jarred on her instincts.

"She looks much older than I do," thought Kathleen; "but I believe colonials grow up early, and having no mother perhaps she was brought out young."

Vana opened her eyes lazily and looked round.

"I am glad you have come back," she said, a little impatiently. "I felt frightened; it is all so quiet, and I am not used to being alone."

"You won't call this house quiet when you have seen the children," said Kathleen, good-temperedly. "Bridget is going to bring us our supper at once. We will have it together—you and I—without waiting for the others."

"That will be very nice," said Vana, sweetly. She had a pretty caressing manner when she was pleased, not unlike a pet kitten's; "and you will be

friends with me, won't you? I am so lonely, and I have always longed for a sister."

It was not in Kathleen's nature to gush over a new acquaintance. She wanted to be kind and friendly, but Miss Doyle's sudden arrival had perplexed her sorely, and she had so much on her mind she could not give herself up entirely to "making friends."

Her father, her mother, and Dermot would all come home separately. She had to watch for three distinct arrivals, and give two sets of warnings and explanations about that horrid man downstairs. While her mind was racked with anxiety as to whether Dermot could pay the six pounds odd needed to rid them of their unwelcome guest, it was difficult to listen attentively to the small talk of the other guest and not to seem flurried and preoccupied.

Tea did Bridget credit—six brown sausages reposing on a bank of mashed potatoes, a little brown pot full of fragrant tea, and a new brown loaf. It might seem a poor repast to the heiress, but Kathleen was painfully conscious of the first destiny of the sausages, and marvelled—supposing Mrs. Rutherford met with a cheap turkey—whether their absence would not rob the Christmas dinner of its most desired adjunct.

Vana ate three sausages and drank two cups of tea; then Kathleen's listening ears caught a familiar footstep and she started up.

"That is my brother. Will you excuse me while I open the door? I think Bridget must be upstairs."

Dermot, a little tired and dispirited with a long day's work, a little grave as he thought of the death-bed he had visited, looked to his sister's anxious eyes unusually serious.

"Where's everyone, Kitty?" he asked, kindly. "The house seems very quiet."

"They are all out but me," she answered. "Dermot, dear, do come into the breakfast-room. I've got something I must tell you."

The agonized entreaty in her voice startled him. He drew her hand through his arm, and led her into the little den at the end of the hall. There was no gas or lamp, but the moon shone in through the unshaded window, and showed him the pale, troubled face.

"What is it, dear?" he asked, quickly. "They shouldn't put everything on your shoulders."

"Vana Doyle came about an hour ago!"

Dermot uttered an exclamation that sounded very much like "the devil!" then he said, cheerfully,—

"Well, Kitty, I always said the heiress would find out our poverty before she had been here a week. Arriving suddenly without any notice the truth will probably burst on her at once, but I don't see that it matters much in the long run."

"Oh, Dermot, that isn't all," and, blushing as terribly as though the calamity had been of her own making, she told him of the presence of the shabby man in the kitchen. "He came just at dusk with a postman's knock. The water thought it was a telegram and went to the door herself."

"She was at home, then, and actually left you alone with him?"

"There was Bridget, besides, Dermot, I made her go. There wasn't a scrap of dinner for to-morrow, and you know she makes ten shillings do wonders in the Borough."

"What is the man in for?" asked Dermot.

"Queen's taxes!"

"I gave the money for them last week! The Captain wheedled it out of me."

"Then he bought clothes with it! He has come out in a complete new rig-out. Oh, Dermot, it is hard on you!"

"That's not the question," said Dermot, gravely. "I was a fool to let the money go through his hands; but, Katy, one must draw the line somewhere, and I shall not pay the taxes a second time. The Captain will have to raise the money somehow."

"And the man?"

"The man will have to stay! Don't tremble so, Kitty; the disgrace is not yours or mine."

"Do you think we can possibly keep the secret from Vana Doyle?"

"You might try. I don't know," with a dreary sort of smile, "if they have such things as men in possession in Australia. Anyway, as a rich man's child Miss Doyle would know nothing of the institution. She won't need to see our visitor, and the children can hold their tongues if you caution them."

"I must go back," said Kitty, wearily. "I was having supper with Vana. Come and join us, Dermot. I'm so worried I can't make conversation, and you always keep calm."

He followed her into the drawing-room, and was introduced to Miss Doyle, who seemed very pleased to make his acquaintance. Seeing Vana thus provided for, Kitty crept upstairs to take counsel with Bridget.

"There'll have to be a fire here till late at night—more's the pity," said that facetious *apropos* of the guest's room. "Mr. Dermot's come home, I see, Miss Kathleen. Have you managed to tell him about the fellow downstairs?"

"Dermot says he can do no more, and must leave the matter to my father."

"Then I reckon Peter Maloney (he told me his name quite friendly like) will stay for a good bit," said Bridget, philosophically. "Don't go to fash yourself, Miss Katy. He seems a decent sort, and ready to turn his hand to anything. He was up here just now helping me to get the smoke under, for when the fire was first lighted it was enough to suffocate a body."

"Biddy," Kathleen hesitated; "can you manage to tell my father? I may not be able to leave Miss Doyle."

"I'll tell him, deary," was the woman's reply. "You'll see, the Captain will take the news very quietly; he's never one to fash himself. And now,

Miss Katy, do you go back to your visitor. I'm sure you look fit for nothing so much as bed. You'll be worn out if you don't take care."

The faithful servant was as good as her word. Not only did the Captain receive her warning, but the boys were intercepted on their arrival, and cajoled into having supper in the kitchen, at which meal Peter Maloney assisted, being introduced to the youngsters with unblushing affront as Bridget's uncle, come all the way from Cork to spend Christmas with her.

"It was very kind of him," remarked Bryan, the Captain's youngest born; "but I guess Katy thinks he ought to have waited till he was invited. She looks dreadfully put about."

Never, surely, had any household been composed of so many troubled hearts on that Christmas Eve as Stoneleigh. Nora and the boys were the only ones with minds sufficiently at ease to fall asleep as soon as their heads touched the pillow.

Captain Rutherford and his wife sat up till the small hours of the morning discussing ways and means, the outcome being that the former should visit Mr. Doyle's English agent as soon as Christmas was turned, and suggesting ten guineas a month as the fee for Vana's maintenance, hinting delicately that such things were usually paid in advance.

"The girl's a beauty," said the Captain, gallantly, "and if only Dermot had a tinge of chivalry in his nature we should be out of our troubles."

Mrs. Rutherford failed to see how, so he was forced to explain.

"That girl has fifty thousand pounds. She knows not a soul in England, and is utterly fancy free. Poor Doyle said so in his last letter. Why should not Dermot marry her and put an end to our worries?"

"I don't believe Dermot is the sort of man to marry for money."

"I am sure he's a deal too old and stiff to fall in love," retorted the Captain; "but even if he can only make a marriage of 'inclination' what's to hinder his caring for Vana. She's one of the best-looking girls I ever saw."

"If he married her to-morrow he couldn't keep his family out of her money," said Mrs. Rutherford, sadly. "Oh, Denis, if you would only put your shoulder to the wheel, and work honestly for a living, that would be far better than match-making for Dermot."

"Why, Patty," said the Captain, reproachfully, "you speak as if I were idle. I'm always working, only I'm so confoundedly unlucky. But cheer up old girl, things must take a turn for the better soon. We can't be always on the wrong side."

She sighed.

"We have never been quite so badly off before—Denis, I never thought we should have a man in possession for our Christmas guest."

"Oh, how like a woman! I said the husband, ironically. "The man will do you no harm, my dear. I've been down to see him, and he's a very decent fellow."

"But the disgrace!"

"There's no disgrace in being poor, Patty. You are almost as unreasonable as Dermot. If you'll believe me, when I asked for an advance just to get rid of this—this person downstairs, he point blank refused!"

"Perhaps he hadn't got it," suggested Mrs. Rutherford, who knew something of the inroads on Dermot's purse, made by his juvenile and encroaching papa.

"Not got it?" repeated the Captain, derisively. "Oh, nonsense! he must have got it. Why, after the pittance he pays us for board, he has about seventy pounds a year, and he's as mean as a canny Scot. I can't think what he does with his money!"

Mrs. Rutherford changed the subject.

"Do you like Miss Doyle?"

"Of course I do. She's wonderfully handsome, and knows how to talk. Remembering the years old Doyle spent in a dull up country town in Australia, I had expected a kind of little savage, or at best a bread-and-butter miss who couldn't speak to a stranger without stammering; but Vana Doyle could hold her own in any society."

"She seems much older than Katy, though Katy is really a few months her senior."

"Katy's a baby," said the Captain. "Oh!" as his wife began a protest, "she's a charming child, but she knows nothing of the world. She couldn't talk like Vana Doyle if her life depended on it."

And Mrs. Rutherford had it in her heart to say she was glad of it.

"I don't often interfere in my own home, Patty," said the Captain, indulging in a mild fiction which no one but himself believed. "You generally have your own way in all domestic matters, but I must request that, for my old friend's sake, you treat Vana Doyle kindly."

"I never was unkind to a motherless girl yet, and I hope I never may be," replied Mrs. Rutherford, with dignity; "but I don't like Vana, and I won't pretend I do."

"She has fifty thousand pounds!" repeated the Captain with emotion. "It's in excellent securities, and brings in nearly three thousand a year. Roughly speaking, that girl has sixty pounds a week. Just think of it—if Dermot married her!"

"I hope he won't," said Patty, stonily.

"Or," went on the Captain, "she might take Kathleen as her companion. She'll have a house in town, I expect, and go regularly into society. She knows no one, and will want introductions."

"Which we can't give her!"

"Patty, you are a regular wet blanket to-night. I may be poor, but I've an estate in Ireland, though it's nothing but bog and ruins. I've the blood of the old Irish kings in my veins. I must be a cut above the daughter of an Australian farmer and his colonial wife!"

Mrs. Rutherford looked up at her husband with a sudden passion in her face.

"You'll call me fanciful, and laugh at me, I dare say, Denis; but I don't like that girl, and something seems to tell me she's come here to do us all an

injury. I never had a presentiment like that before, and I believe it's sent as a warning."

"Oh, rubbish!" said the Captain, irritably. "Shut up, do! It's Christmas morning, and you ought to think the best of everyone instead of slandering an innocent child!"

In the very next room the "innocent child" sat over the embers of her fire.

"Ugh!" she said, with a kind of shiver, "I must make haste to bed, or I shall be frozen. If I had known a little more about Captain Rutherford's *ménage* I should not have been quite so anxious to enjoy his hospitality . . . but the die is cast now, and I must play out the game to the bitter end."

"Dermot Rutherford is handsome, and clever, too, I should say, but he's not in the least the sort of man I expected. I dare say, though, he will do very well for a husband. Anyway, I mean to marry him. . . . Six weeks is not a very long time for courtship, proposal, and wedding day, but a longer delay would be dangerous."

Dermot himself thought not at all of the beautiful heiress, but a great deal of the strange scene he had witnessed at Sotham Court—a scene he might have fancied was a dream but for the diamond ring which he looked away carefully before he slept. And Kathleen, who kept vigil longer, perhaps, than any of the others, fell asleep at last with the music of the Christmas waltz ringing in her ears.

"I saw three ships come sailing in,
On Christmas day, on Christmas day,
I saw three ships come sailing in
On Christmas day in the morning."

From earliest childhood Kitty had been used to her father's promising her all sorts of splendours when "his ship came in." Old childish memories mingled with the Christmas carol, till it seemed to Kathleen the three ships chaunted of were really three fortunes—one for her father, another for Dermot, and a third for herself. She was conscious of a dim desire that Dermot's fortune should not come with the hand of Vana Doyle, and then she sank to sleep.

CHAPTER III.

THE Australian heiress had told Kathleen that her companion died just before she sailed for England; but this was a pleasing fiction invented for the young lady's own ends. Violet Nairn, who had been almost like an adopted daughter to Mr. Doyle and a sister to his child, was alive, and a passenger by the steamer previous to the one by which the Rutherfords' guest had reached England.

Miss Nairn was not pretty, judged by the artistic standard of beauty. Her features were irregular, and she was too pale. Her only claim to good looks consisted of a pair of tender, expressive brown eyes, and a mass of soft auburn hair which looked like gold in the sunshine. She was a slender, willowy girl, and her expression was generally sad as that of one who had lived chiefly in the shade. She had loved Mr. Doyle with a passionate gratitude, and she had tried hard to love his daughter, but Vana was one of those creatures who seem born with a warp to their nature. When she had no one else at hand she was glad to talk to Violet and be familiar with her, but in the presence of others she never failed to slight and humiliate the girl. She was always taking a fancy to strangers, violent and intense while it lasted, but generally ending, after a few months, in a bitter quarrel.

Her latest attachment was for a very fascinating Englishwoman whom she had met while staying with her father at a Melbourne boarding-house. Nothing would satisfy her but that Miss Winter should be invited on a long visit to the Creek (Mr. Doyle's farm), and Miss Winter, having nothing else on hand, and being desperately hard up, gratefully accepted the same.

She was very beautiful and very fascinating. Once arrived at the farm, and seeing all round her proofs of Mr. Doyle's wealth, it occurred to her she might do worse than remain at the Creek as Vana's stepmother.

Vana was much too infatuated to see her friend's ambition. Violet Nairn, who *did* see it, dared not warn the heiress, and so Miss Winter's plans seemed likely to meet with success only that before Vana's eyes were opened to the stranger's real character. Mr. Doyle died suddenly.

Long ago he had promised to provide for Violet, but his will had been made years before she came under his care, and he had always put off signing a codicil which would have secured her from want. As things were, his whole property went to his daughter, with the instructions that Vana was to start for England at once, and reside with his old friends, the Rutherfords, until her plans were decided.

The Colonial lawyer, as much fascinated by Miss Winter as the rest of his sex, asked her to travel to England with the young heiress, offering her her passage and a handsome honorarium; but he never troubled his head about Violet Nairn, and Vana, who had always been a little jealous of her father's affection for her companion, told the girl, cruelly, she must look out for herself.

"You have had a home here for seven years, and every advantage," she said, coldly. "My father evidently thought you qualified to earn your own living, and the sooner you begin the better."

"It is impossible," said Miss Winter, severely, "that dear Vana should charge herself with your support, but I am sure she would not grudge a small sum of money, say twenty or thirty pounds; to start you in life."

Violet ignored Miss Winter, and spoke to Vana as though no other person had been present.

"I will never touch a penny of your money! We have been like sisters

for seven years, and now you cast me aside like a worn-out glove. But I don't want your charity!"

She took counsel with the clergyman of the nearest township, and the doctor who had attended Mr. Doyle. These two were not blinded by Miss Winter's fascinations, and had taken that lady's measure pretty thoroughly.

"It is not Vana's own doing," they told Violet, "but the influence of that foreign-looking woman under whose toils she has fallen. It is shameful Mr. Doyle's known wishes should be set at naught, but I am afraid we are powerless to make his daughter carry them out. Will you tell us what your own wishes are for your future, and we will help you to do the best of our power."

And Violet, who had left England a child of ten, old enough to remember and yearn for her native land, confessed her one desire was to go "home." She had a cousin married in London whom she thought would help her to find a situation, if only she could get to England.

It so happened a lady well known to the clergyman was "going home" with a family of little children, and her governess having failed her at the last minute, she was seeking someone to replace her on the voyage, since being in delicate health she could not possibly look after five little girls herself. A few letters passed, and then Violet set out to join Mrs. Ainslie in Melbourne, much to the discomfiture of Miss Winter and Vana, who had taken a cruel animosity against the gentle girl, and bitterly resented the thought that she was also going "home."

Violet had been so shut out of all their conferences that she knew absolutely nothing of Vana's future plans, beyond that she was to spend some time first with a friend of her father's near London. Unlike the colonial born heiress, Violet knew sufficient of the old country not to fear a meeting with Vana, even if they lived in the same town. She was grievously sorry for her friend's coldness, but tried hard to put it down to Miss Winter's influence. She was only a girl of twenty, but instinct told her Vana's dear friend was as unscrupulous and dangerous woman.

The parting was painful to both the girls. For seven years they had lived together almost as sisters, and the thought that they might never meet again brought the tears into Violet's eyes in spite of Vana's recent unkindness.

"I wish you would write to me," she pleaded; "just one letter, Vana, to say you are well and happy."

"I am sure to be happy," said Vana. "Cora says London is the only place worth living in. You may give me your cousin's address, Violet; perhaps I'll write."

She did not volunteer her own address, but promised when she was settled in a home of her own to write.

"I shall not stay long with papa's old friend," she observed condescendingly. "Cora says they live in a dull, unfashionable part— Besides, it would not be safe."

Violet started.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"If I die unmarried my whole fortune goes to the eldest son. Don't you see, they would have every inducement—"

"To poison you!" finished Violet, with a cheerful laugh. "Oh, Vana, how can you be so silly! People don't poison their visitors nowadays, if they ever did outside cheap novels."

She knew that Vana and Miss Winter were to sail by the steamer next after her own, and that they were to spend the intervening days in a very fashionable hotel near Collins Street. A strange, vague misgiving seized her as she said good bye to Vana, that she was leaving her at the mercy of a bad, heartless woman of the world; but she tried to dispel her presentiment of ill, for after all, she argued, Miss Winter had no possible inducement to injure Vana, while everything in the world would point out to her it was to her interest to look after her.

Mrs. Ainslie proved a gentle, kindly woman, very much wrapped up in her children, but with a fair share of interest left over for the joys and sorrows of other people.

"So your cousin is a doctor's wife, and has five children?" she said, cheerfully. "Then, depend upon it, Miss Nairn she won't let you take a situation. She will be too glad of your help herself."

"I have a little money," confessed Violet, with a blush. "Mr. Doyle gave me a very liberal allowance and encouraged us to save. I have fifty pounds of my very own, and if Lucy and Dr. Olive are poor I thought I could pay them for my board and lodging while I stayed with them."

"I shouldn't think they would want you to do that. How long is it since you saw them?"

"Ten years ago. Lucy lived with us till she was married. She had been engaged some time when father's health broke down, and we went out to Australia. Mother wanted her to come with us for a year, but Dr. Olive persuaded her to marry him at once. She used to write very often, but since the babies came she had less time. When papa died she offered to take me, but Mr. Doyle told her I was provided for while he lived."

"Well," said Mrs. Ainslie, kindly, "I prophecy you will be very happy with your cousins; but if not, remember while I am in England you have a friend always ready to help you, and then, you see, Mr. Right is sure to come along one of these days, and then you'll have a home of your own."

"I don't think anyone will ever want to marry me," said Violet, gravely. "Now, Vana Doyle has had a lover on hand ever since I can remember. She changed them every year."

"I wish she had someone with her more trustworthy than that Miss Winter," said Mrs. Ainslie. "I met her once in Melbourne, and I can tell you she's a queer customer."

Violet sighed.

"I never could see why Vana liked her so much. They are as different as possible."

"Oh, but Miss Winter flattered her, I expect. I only hope Miss Doyle's fortune is not at her own command. I don't think that woman would stick at much!"

Violet wrote from Plymouth to announce her arrival to her cousins, and when the steamer reached London a tall, pleasant-looking man was ready to meet her. He was much older than the gay young bridegroom she remembered, but his eyes had the old kindly twinkle, his voice the old friendly ring. He shook hands with Mrs. Ainslie, and thanked her for the care of his "little cousin," and told Violet Lucy would think it just like the millennium to have a grown-up sister, and then having made the poor lonely girl feel perfectly at home with him he drove off in a cab, with her boxes on the top, for London Bridge station, whence he told her they would take the train for West Heath, where his brougham would meet them.

"I only set it up last year," said Tom, good-temperedly, "and Lucy is nearly as proud of it as of the last new baby. She is delighted you are coming. She and I never could understand your staying in Australia. When your father and mother died you belonged to us."

Violet made a nervous little speech about being a burden, and he and Lucy having other claims, but he laughed the idea to scorn.

"A small person like you does not make much difference in a family," he said, cheerfully. "Besides doesn't Lucy owe everything to your father and mother. Now, Miss Violet, you may have picked up some wonderful notions of independence and New Womanhood, but let me tell you one thing once for all: There's a home for you with us as long as you like to take it, and if you can't put up with our humdrum life we'll do our best to help you to be happy in your own way."

"Oh, Tom, how good you are! You make me feel as if I had come home."

"Well, that's just what you have done," he said, heartily.

"I was afraid you and Lucy would think me a nuisance. Poor relations so often are."

"We're not made that way. I hope," rather sharply, "the DoYLES didn't treat you after that fashion. I'd never have left you at the Creek, but the old man said your father had arranged it, and he would look on you as a second daughter."

"He was as kind as kind could be. He never made any difference between me and Vana, and he had written a codicil to his will leaving me five thousand pounds, only it was not signed."

"Five thousand pounds would have been a nice little provision," said the doctor; "but I suppose his executors could do nothing as the codicil was not signed!"

"They said it rested with Vana."

"And she is too fond of money to care to part with it. Never mind, Violet, you'll get on all right without it."

"I didn't want the money," said Violet; "but I felt hurt at her refusing."

"What is she doing now?"

Violet told him as far as she knew.

He smiled indulgently.

"Well, she'll find her level in London. Fifty thousand pounds is not so very remarkable here."

Lucy was ready with a welcome as warm, or warmer, than her husband's. A fire burnt cheerily in the spare room, and dinner was ready as soon as Violet's wraps had been taken off. Certainly in the matter of welcome and reception Violet came off better than the heiress Vana Doyle was destined to do a week later at Stoneleigh.

"You are just in time for Christmas," said Mrs. Clive. "Tom and I always keep it up to the best of our power."

"Which means the house is crammed with a cartload of holly and evergreens," said the doctor, mischievously, "and we all eat the most unwholesome dishes."

Lucy shook her head.

"I believe in old customs. I hate people who sneer at carols and plum-pudding. We always had a happy Christmas Day when I was a child, and I mean my chicks to have the same."

"Amen!" responded Tom the incorrigible. "By the way, Lucy, did you go to Stoneleigh?"

"Yes, Kathleen can't come. She put it down to not being able to leave the children, but I honestly believe the dear girl hasn't a dress fit for a party, and thinks we should be ashamed of her in her shabby gown."

"Kathleen Rutherford is the prettiest girl in these parts," said Tom, in an aside to Violet, "and she is, besides, the prop and stay of the most poverty-stricken household you could find. Seeing which, Lucy has a conspiracy to rob them of her."

"Kathleen is a darling," said Lucy to her cousin. "Her father is an Irish officer, rather poorer than the proverbial church mouse, and quite as proud as Lucifer. There is a sombre-looking elder brother, and any number of small children; but Kathleen is the flower of the flock."

"And Hurst thinks so, thanks to you," grumbled her husband.

"Mr. Hurst is Tom's junior partner," explained Lucy, "and he has a little something of his own besides his earnings, so he could quite afford to marry. Once when Tom was away he went to Stoneleigh when one of the boys broke an arm, and fell in love with Katy on the spot; but the Rutherfords keep no company, and he is afraid to call lest the imperious papa should snub him; so he would never set eyes on his divinity unless I sometimes contrived meetings for them here."

CHAPTER IV.

BREAKFAST on Christmas morning brought the whole Rutherford family together for the first time since Vana Doyle had joined them. Looking at the party with critical eyes the guest was forced to confess they had more than ordinary good looks.

Mrs. Rutherford might be pale and anxious, Dermot's manner a little stern, but, for all that, they were a wonderfully attractive family; and Vana muttered to herself that "things might have been worse"—an allusion, her hosts would not have understood had they heard it.

"And this is your first English Christmas, Vana?" said the Captain, cheerily. "Doesn't it seem topsy-turvy to you, coming in winter?"

"Just a little," returned the heiress, languidly; "but my father would keep up all English customs, so I knew what to expect. When the thermometer was at ninety in the shade we religiously ate plum pudding, and from my earliest years I was taught to sing carols all about ice and snow, although I had never seen either."

"Where did you land, Miss Doyle?" asked Dermot.

"At Plymouth. I came on by rail train. We got in earlier than we expected. Some of the passengers had been in an awful funk lest they should have to spend Christmas on board. Such a fuss to make about nothing! As though the twenty-fifth of December was different from other days!"

"It is different," said Katy, simply; "at least I think so. I shouldn't like to take no notice of Christmas; and she looked admiringly at some sprigs of holly the children had brought in."

Dermot shrugged his shoulders.

"Katy believes in Christmas nearly as firmly as the Clives, and they make quite a festival of it. I'm not sure but what they play at forfeits and snap-dragon with their children every Christmas Eve."

"Clive is not a bad fellow," said Captain Rutherford, patronisingly. "I am glad we employed him, for I think he understands his work."

"He is our doctor," Katy explained to Miss Doyle; "and he has such a pretty wife."

As yet Tom Clive had not received a penny from the Rutherfords, and had, moreover, rather a long bill against them, but it was clear, from the Captain's manner, he believed his patronage had been of great assistance to the struggling physician.

"Didn't they ask you to a party, Kathleen?" demanded Mrs. Rutherford.

"Yes, on New-Year's Eve, but I am not going. I told Mrs. Rutherford I could not be spared."

"Surely you might manage it," said her father, "and take Miss Doyle with you. A little change would be good for her."

Kathleen kept silent; it was equally difficult to explain that she had no festive attire, that Vana was not invited, and that the idea of her appearing at a party so soon after her father's death was not correct to English taste.

Breakfast could not last for ever. Mrs. Rutherford and Kathleen had a hurried consultation after it was over. The turkey had been duly purchased, also a piece of beef, but neither was very large, and—counting the man in possession—there were eleven to partake of dinner. Which would be most economical—to dine early and have a light supper, or to make the festive meal at seven and lunch sparingly at one?

"We had better dine in the evening," Katy said at last; "that will give Bridget more time. Do you suppose Miss Doyle will go to church, dear?"

"Your father says we are to call her Vana," explained Mrs. Rutherford. "I don't think she *ought* to go, Katy; she hasn't a scrap of mourning, not even a band of crape on her arm!"

"Perhaps I had better ask her," said Kathleen; but she was much relieved when Miss Doyle declared herself too tired. She was going skating with the Captain and Nora, which would refresh her—(to Katy skating sounded harder work than going to church).

"I am out out at last, Kathleen," said Nora, in a tragic voice, when her elder sister went up to the room they shared to dress for church. "Our revered parent has eyes and ears only for the heiress."

"I feel very grateful to him for amusing her," said Kathleen, gravely.

"Well," replied Nora, who never could take things seriously, "it looked to me as though the chieftain were doing Dermot's wooing by proxy, and courting Miss Vana on our brother's behalf."

"You shouldn't jest about such things!" said Kathleen, with attempted severity.

"But it's so evident. Why, the chieftain entertained me all the time we were out yesterday with the praises of Miss Doyle's fortune, and the good which would come to us all if she married Dermot! He has quite set his heart on it."

"Papa and Dermot don't always think alike!"

"That's true," said Nora, with a roguish smile. "Katy, you needn't start for church yet; just sit down and tell me, what do you think of our future sister?"

"I won't talk to you if you call her that!"

"Well, what do you think of the Captain's ward?"

"She is very pretty and attractive."

"Isn't she. But"—Nora looked at her sister demurely—"is she quite a lady?"

"Nora!"

"Well, my dear, I freely grant my observations for judging have been strictly limited. Ladies, it seems to me, don't care to visit this impoverished Irish family; but still I should have said the fair Vana was not quite—"

"Not quite what?"

"I can't hit on the right word. Shall I say she has not got the hall-mark of true silver?"

"Colonial girls are different from English."

"I daresay," said Nora, meekly; "but Miss Doyle seems to me to have picked up a fair amount of English lower-class customs, and—she talks with a cockney twang. Her clothes are very fine, but she doesn't look as much a lady as you do in that rather shabby blue serge."

"We must make the best of her. I do hope she won't stay very long."

"Or discover our very unwelcome guest downstairs. Katy, isn't it awful such a thing should have happened at Christmas?"

Katy nodded.

"Someone must do something, and that soon," said Nora, firmly. "If Dermot doesn't see his way to redeem the family fortune by marrying Vana Doyle, I really think you or I ought to try and provide the Rutherfords with a rich relation, only the fates are not so kind to us. Dermot's heiress is brought to the very door. We don't know a single rich young man."

"You are a foolish child!" said Kathleen, with a caress, which took all sting out of the words. "Now I must be going."

The Rutherfords were not a religious family, and to-day the church goers numbered only two—Katy and her eldest brother. She was rather glad of it. She always liked to be alone with Dermot.

"Don't look so sad, dear," she ventured, when they had left Stoneleigh behind them. "Things must take a turn soon, Dermot. I heard the carol singers last night declaring they 'saw three ships come sailing in,' and I tried hard to believe one of the three was yours or mine."

"Life comes hardest on you, Katy," he said, kindly; "at least, I got away from the troubles six days a week, but you are always at home."

"If only I could earn money I wouldn't stay at home another week," said Kathleen. "Three daughters would be quite enough to help the mater, but you see, Dermot, I haven't been trained to work, and unskilled labour is a drag in the market."

"I should leave Stoneleigh at once if you were not there," said Dermot. "I can't explain it to you, Katy, but my father's placid indifference exasperates me. He never seems to see that debt is dishonourable."

"I'm so dreadfully afraid he will borrow money of someone to pay out that man," said Kathleen. "I've been over all the people we know in my mind, and I can't think of anyone likely, but—I know he wouldn't mind."

"Not a scrap!" replied Dermot, gloomily. "Katy, shall you and I cut the old home and set up our tent together somewhere? Two people have lived on a hundred and thirty pounds a year before now."

"I wouldn't live on your money for worlds," responded his sister.

"Supposing you wanted to marry, shouldn't I be in the way?"

"You may marry yourself," he suggested, coolly.

"I don't think it's likely," she returned; "and, Dermot, it would not be right."

"Whyever not?"

"Because papa has a fatal talent for borrowing, and never by any chance pays back. Just fancy if I were married! Every time he came to see me I should suspect he was trying to get a loan from my husband."

They were at the church gate. Kathleen tried hard to leave dull care outside, and to think only of the joyous festival, but she could not quite succeed. Even as she looked at the beautiful decorations the dingy figure of the man in possession would rise up before her, and while she tried to listen to the sermon doubts as to the capabilities of the turkey to dine eleven people would obtrude themselves.

Kathleen was over-weighted with sordid cares, poor girl, and her higher nature could not quite rise above them.

Of course the Rutherfords did not boast a pew, but the vergers regarded Kathleen with special favour, and always gave them a seat in the middle aisle.

To-day it happened to be just behind Dr. Clive's, and she could not but notice a fresh face at his wife's side—a slender, black-robed girl with a shadowy resemblance to Mrs. Clive which proclaimed her a relation.

Mr. Hurst was not in church; no doubt he was attending to some patients. The three older Clive children were with their parents—as bonny a group as any there.

Lucy Clive managed to overtake Kathleen and her brother after church, and invited them to come home with her as a matter of course.

"Going to dine late are you?" she said, gaily. "Oh, then, you can't refuse. I haven't seen you for an age. We dine at two on account of the chicks, and you must spare us an hour. This is my cousin, Violet Nairn. She is quite a stranger in England, and I want you to be friends with her."

Kathleen thought of another girl "quite a stranger in England," and wished she could have changed the two. There was something in Violet's sweet pure face she thought very winning. The two girls walked on together while Mrs. Clive gave her attention to Dermot.

"Mr. Rutherford, I want you to use your influence and send Kathleen to my little party on New Year's Eve, or, better still, bring her yourself—if you don't despise such a poor affair as a carpet dance."

"I will come, certainly, and bring Katy," said Dermot, who always tried to give his favourite sister a taste of pleasure. "She wanted to accept your invitation, Mrs. Clive, but there is always a lot to do at home, and Katy will make herself a kind of family burden carrier."

"You shouldn't let her!"

Dermot lowered his voice. He regarded Mrs. Clive as the nicest woman of his acquaintance, and knew that he could trust her.

"I've just been suggesting to Katy we should run away together, she and I, and leave the rest to muddle on, but she doesn't approve of the idea. Mrs. Clive, why do good women like to be martyrs?"

"Ask me something easier. But I believe you are right. Look at my cousin."

"Is she a martyr?" and Dermot smiled. "I did look at her in church, and I thought she had a sweet face, only too sad."

"Her parents died seven years ago, and instead of coming home to us she stayed at the Antipodes, at the back and call of some odious heiress—a kind of unpaid companion and white slave."

"But she must have been a child seven years ago," objected Dermot.

"She was thirteen! Oh, she didn't have to work or do anything menial, as the advertisements put it, but she was trampled on all the same by a disagreeable heiress. I hate heiresses!"

"So do I."

And then they both laughed heartily.

Arrived at the doctor's house they all spent a pleasant half hour, talking on various subjects; but though the Clives were not in the least reserved, and Violet was by no means ashamed of her past life, a very strange thing happened. No one mentioned that she had come from Australia, or that the name of the heiress Mrs. Clive so condemned was Vana Doyle.

The Rutherfords, on their side, had more cause for reticence. Neither Dermot nor Kathleen liked what they had seen of their new inmate, and so, naturally enough, they said nothing about her. Besides, both were sensitive to a fault. As it was they hated accepting hospitality they could not return. To speak of their young lady guest would have been like asking Mrs. Clive to include her in the invitation.

"Now, Kathleen," said Dermot, as they walked home, "not a word of the party, or the mater will call on Mrs. Clive and angle for an invitation for Vana Doyle. You must meet me in London on Saturday, and we will choose a dress together. It shall be my Christmas present."

"But, Dermot, you can't afford it, and—"

"And what, Miss Katy?"

"I do so hate taking all and giving nothing. You have had no Christmas present, Dermot."

"I have had two," returned Dermot, quietly, "and I should have bought you a Christmas box yesterday, only I had to go into the country for the firm, and it was too late for shopping when I got back."

"Oh, Dermot, what were the presents?"

"You must keep it a dead secret, dear, if I tell you. Our respected parent would think me meaner than ever if he knew I had had such gifts, and yet refused to help him to get rid of the man in possession."

"I shan't tell a soul."

"Well, Mr. Finch gave me a cheque for twenty pounds, whether as godson or clerk I don't know. I only got it quite late when I went back to the office, and found it in an envelope on my desk."

"Twenty pounds!" Her eyes sparkled.

"I left it locked up at the office. I only spoke the truth when I assured my father I had not got six pounds about me."

"And the other present?"

"That was from a client. . . . I went down into the country about a will and she gave me a diamond ring."

"Dermot!"

"She was an old lady, very rich and very eccentric. Her attendant insisted on my taking the ring, or I might have refused. The poor old lady was dying, and I thought, at first, taking a gift from her would be like robbing a child; but the nurse assured me not. She smiled, poor old thing, when she put it on my hand, and told me to keep it for my wife."

Kathleen flashed an expressive glance at her brother.

"Don't show it to papa."

"I never meant to. It is safely locked up, and I rather fancy I shall not keep it at Stoneleigh. I will show it you before I take it away."

"And pray whose finger is it to adorn, Dermot?"

He laughed.

"Haven't you just assured me two people could not live on my income?"

"Haven't I just assured you our ship is coming in, and that some day we shall be rich?"

"I can't see how," objected Dermot, moodily. "Why, Kathleen, if tenants paid their rents and a few pounds were scraped out of the Irish estate our parent talks so much about, don't you suppose he would want every penny for himself?"

"I am afraid so."

"No," said Dermot, gravely. "No one will leave me a legacy. I shall never be rich enough to buy a partnership—never be able to throw up my post and start for myself. The risk would be too great. I shall be a clerk all my days, Katy, and I must think myself lucky if I save enough to keep me out of the workhouse in my old age."

The tears rose to the girl's sweet eyes, but she forced them bravely back, and at that moment the voices of the carol singers sounded in their ears.

"I saw 'Three Ships Come Sailing In.'"

"Take that as a prophecy," she said, brightly. "We shall be rich folks yet, Dermot."

"Never!" replied her brother, but he smiled as he said it, and Kathleen felt her cheerfulness had not been in vain.

CHAPTER V.

DINNER went off admirably. The turkey was amply sufficient for all demands on it, and Bridget had proved herself a skilful cook. There was, however, a strange elation about the Captain which his children could not in the least account for, and which could hardly be due to the influence of the bottled beer. Kathleen felt a strange sense of mystery in the air, and going down into the kitchen later with some directions to Biddy, she found that valued retainer sitting alone by the fire, with no trace of the man in possession visible.

"If it's Peter Maloney you're looking for, Miss Katy, sure he's gone."

"Gone!" Kathleen did not feel the exultation the news ought to have given her, but a strange painful misgiving.

"I thought he was bound to stay till he was paid!" she hesitated.

"And it's paid he was, Miss Katy. The master came down as soon as he and Miss Doyle were back from their walk. He paid Peter in a nice little heap of sovereigns, and told him never to mind about the change, but drink our healths with it, as it was Christmas time."

And last night the Captain had not had a piece of gold in his possession. The meaning was clear enough. He had "borrowed" of the Australian heiress. What Kathleen said to her brother on the subject no one else heard, but the result was, Dermot sat up after the others retired, and "tackled" his father bravely.

"It's not a pleasant thing to speak of, sir," he began abruptly, "but I have reason to believe you have borrowed money of Miss Doyle."

"And if I have," said the Captain loftily, "it's not your place to call me to account! You are not guardian of the young lady and her fortune yet, my fine fellow."

"And never shall be in the sense you mean!" replied his son; "but I won't see an orphan girl robbed by my own father, and so I shall call on Mr. Doyle's English agent and tell him what is going on."

"You can please yourself. If the dear girl, seeing the bother we were in, chose to offer to pay a month's board and lodging in advance, it's not you who should cavil at it, seeing the pittance you pay for such items!"

Dermot said nothing more to his father, but he contrived to find himself *à tête-à-tête* with Vana the next day—no easy matter in that crowded house—and put the matter before her plainly.

"His father," the poor fellow coloured like a girl as he spoke, "thought very lightly of pecuniary obligations. The Captain was in considerable embarrassments, would she, as a favour to his family, while she remained at Stoneleigh, oblige them by not making any monetary advances to her host?"

Vana took the admonition charmingly.

"I couldn't help seeing something was the matter," she said, frankly, "and I made the Captain tell me all about it. I never thought you could be angry. My father would not have sent me here to be a burden on his old friend. I always hoped to be allowed to contribute my share of the household expenses while I was here. What can it matter whether I do it in advance, or not?"

Dermot winced.

"I never doubted the kindness of your motives; but it is so terrible to me that my father should prey upon a guest."

"But he didn't," said Vana, with a smile. "I think Captain Rutherford is perfectly charming, and he has been so kind to me he has almost made me forget I am a stranger in a strange land."

A tear trembled in her glorious eyes; she looked superbly beautiful, and Dermot was touched in spite of himself.

"I only wish we had a better home to welcome you to," he said gently.

"It is so kind of you to let me come. I felt so lonely and desolate when I landed in England, and when I came here your sister was as kind as though I had been a dear friend. I have heard of Irish hospitality before, but I know now what it means."

Dermot could hardly call his interview successful, since he had extracted no promise from Vana that she would refuse further advances to the Captain, but the little *tête-à-tête* had certainly drawn them nearer together, and he began to fancy he and Kathleen had judged the stranger too harshly.

It was a relief to him when Boxing Day was over and he returned to the office. Christmas had brought poor Dermot very little either of peace or goodwill, for his father treated him with a kind of sullen animosity, and the atmosphere of his home, in spite of all Katy's efforts, was most unhomelike.

Mr. Finch was at the office early, and summoned Dermot at once to his presence.

"Lady Linton died a few hours after you left Sotham Court," he said, gravely, "and I have had about a dozen inquisitive letters from anxious relatives, all demanding to know the nature of her will."

"She destroyed all those I took down but one," said Dermot. "I placed that in the safe."

"Just so. I have already examined it. The funeral will be the day after to-morrow. I shall attend to read the will, and I think, as the person who received her last instructions, you had better accompany me."

"Very well, sir. I am afraid there will be a great deal of disappointment when her relations hear the will."

"They deserve it. It is a perfectly just will, but none of them will think so. Did you ever hear Lady Linton's story?"

"Never; but when I saw her on Christmas Eve I felt very sorry for her. In spite of her wealth she seemed so terribly lonely, and it was plain the relations thought only of her money, not of her."

Mr. Finch smiled.

"Well, lawyers shouldn't gossip, but there is very little business doing to-day, so I can afford half an hour to tell you the Linton romance. My mother went to school with the two heroines, so I am well up in the details. Mary Lascelles and Dorothy Linton were the greatest possible friends; they were nearly the same age; and but that one was rich and the other poor they had much the same gifts—beauty, youth, birth and accomplishments. Old Lady Linton was alive then and kept Sir Rupert's house, for he had been many years a widower, and Dorothy was his only child.

"One Christmas the three girls were together at Sotham Court—Dorothy, the heiress of the house, her great friend, Mary Lascelles, and my mother, who was a special favourite with the Dowager. A distant cousin of the Lintons, Paul Linton, was also staying there, and he fell head over ears in love with Mary Lascelles.

"She returned his affection to the full, and there is no doubt they

would have married, only in an evil hour Sir Rupert discovered the beauty and charms of his daughter's friend. Love and interest struggled, and just what one would have expected happened—Miss Lascelles jilted the briefless barrister and became Lady Linton.

"From that hour her friendship for Dorothy was turned into hatred. The widowed Lady Linton and her grandchild retired to the Dover House. Sir Rupert and his young wife lived alone at the Court. There was hardly any intercourse between the houses till there came a rumour that Dorothy was to marry her cousin Paul.

"The woman who had jilted him was furious at his going for consolation to her step daughter. Lady Linton's influence over her husband was boundless, and she made him threaten Dorothy with being disinherited if she married his kinsman. The Dowager, however, favoured the match, and it took place on Dorothy's twenty-first birthday, the young couple residing with the old lady.

"She had saved a great deal of money, and had intended to leave it all to Dorothy. Unfortunately she died suddenly. No will was found. Sir Rupert was heir-at-law, and refused the slightest provision for his daughter. Egged on by his wife, he persecuted the young couple to such an extent that Paul found it utterly impossible to get employment in England, and went abroad with his wife. The following year Sir Rupert died, leaving all he had to his widow. At twenty-two, Mary Lady Linton was the richest woman in the county and absolutely free. Suitors came in plenty, but she never gave any the least encouragement. Generous to a fault, where her own relations were concerned, liberal to her servants, and charitable to the poor, she has lived for years a blameless life, but she has never been happy. I have known her ever since I can remember anything, and I always thought her the saddest person I ever met. Her money has brought her no happiness. Those she has helped with it have turned out ill. Her wealth has made her a mark for all the idle incorrigibles among her kindred, and if—as my mother thought—she plotted and planned to turn her husband's heart against his child that she might enjoy his property, why that property has never brought her any happiness."

"And where is Mrs. Linton? Surely," and Dermot looked surprised, "she must be an old woman by now?"

"The same age as our late client. Her eldest child would be an elderly woman."

"And has nothing been heard of her?"

"Nothing! It is more than fifty years since she left England. She was then in very delicate health, and may not have survived the voyage. Her daughter, a sickly, premature infant, may have died with her. All is conjecture and uncertainty."

"Except the fact that in no case will Lady Linton's own family profit by her wealth," said Dermot, thoughtfully. "Failing the heirs of Dorothy Linton, some charities divide the property."

"Yes; but we shall have to scour the world for Mrs. Linton and her descendants first. I must find some trustworthy person to make inquiries in America. No," as he caught a glance in Dermot's eye, "I can't send you, my boy, because I want you here. Danvers, the senior clerk, is leaving; has bought a partnership in the country, and I think of giving you his post, only—"

Dermot looked very grave. Danvers enjoyed two hundred and fifty pounds a year—nearly double his own salary.

Mr. Finch went on slowly and reluctantly.

"You would have to leave Stoneleigh. I have known your father for a good many years, and I know that while you live under his roof he will expect your purse to be always at his disposal. If you are to be the manager of my office you mustn't have your life worried out of you by home bothers. As a companion Denis Rutherford is the pleasantest man I ever met; but to be connected with in business he is the reverse of satisfactory. I can't have my managing clerk living in a house where summonses are a daily event."

"And a man in possession a Christmas guest!" said Dermot, bitterly.

"You don't mean it!"

"Queen's taxes. I wish my father were not so fascinating. If only he looked shabby and disreputable people wouldn't trust him; but he always dresses well, and looks as if he could buy up the contents of any shop he entered, and so strangers will go on thinking him a man of substance."

"He was here on Christmas Eve."

"What?"

"I haven't the least doubt he watched you out. He came ten minutes after you had started for Sotham."

"And his errand?"

"The usual one! Don't look so guilty, Dermot, my dear boy. It's not your fault, and this kind of thing has been going on since before you were born. I told the Captain frankly I couldn't afford to give him money, and I found lending was only another name for that. He said sadly that I misjudged him. Then he told me that, in spite of your coldness and ingratitude, he should always have your welfare at heart, and he hoped soon to procure you a fortune. I am afraid I smiled, Dermot. Anyway, I suggested he had better procure one for himself first. But he was not offended (it takes a great deal to offend your father). He only smiled, and said he was afraid Mrs. Rutherford would object to his committing bigamy. Then it dawned on me the fortune was to be gained by marrying an heiress."

"I believe he thinks it is."

"You'd better stick to your profession," said Mr. Finch. "You'll get on in time, and when I think of Lady Linton's dreary life and lonely death I don't feel inclined to advise anyone to marry for money. But is it true that there is an heiress waiting for your acceptance?"

"One is staying at Stoneleigh," confessed Dermot, "wonderful as it

sounds; but I have not the slightest desire to lay claim to her heart or fortune."

CHAPTER VI.

KATHLEEN met Dermot in town on the day they had fixed, and together they bought the evening dress which was to be worn at Mrs. Clive's party. Those who thought the young lawyer harsh and cold would have been astonished at his interest in the expedition. It was he who insisted on the pale blue crepon which Katy thought too expensive. He who suggested the bodice could be made at the shop and forwarded to Stoneleigh by parcel post. He, finally, who declared they must have a nice little dinner to celebrate the occasion, and while they were consuming it told Katy of his good fortune.

"The ships are coming," said Kathleen, merrily. "They were not in time for Christmas morning, but depend upon it, Dermot, they will all three be here before Yuletide is over."

"Mr. Finch wants me to leave Stoneleigh," said Dermot, gravely. "In fact, he says I must do so. He makes it a condition of giving me Danvers' post."

"I shall miss you awfully," said Katy, "and yet I am rather glad!"

"You unfeeling child!"

"I'm frightened," she said, in a low tone. "Dermot, I can't help it. I don't like Vana Doyle, and I am afraid if you remain at home you will end by marrying her."

"I think you are too hard on the girl, Katy; but I do assure you I have no idea of presenting her to you as a sister."

"She calls you 'Dermot,'" objected Katy. "It's dreadfully free and easy."

"Perhaps colonial people don't go in for formalities."

"She was born in Australia, and had never been in England till she came to us, yet she seems to know as much about London as I do."

"Well," said Dermot, "you know most novels describe the modern Babylon, and I expect she has read a good many."

"One comfort," said Kathleen, "she knows about the party, and she does not want to go. I was quite frightened for the chieftain suggested writing to ask for an invitation for her, but she only smiled prettily and told him she did not feel up to gaiety just at present."

"Perhaps we have wronged her, and she does miss her father and her old home after all," said Dermot, who was far more charitable than his sister in the matter of Vana Doyle.

"Where shall you live, Dermot? You can't set up housekeeping without furniture."

"Mr. Finch suggests I should go to stay with him till Easter. He thinks that would give less offence at home than my taking strange lodgings."

"And he only lives at Sydenham, so you won't seem so very far away," said Katy.

Mrs. Clive's party was on New Year's eve. There were only twenty guests, but it was a delightful affair. To begin with, Lucy and her husband both hated show and pretension, so no "grand" people were invited: only such friends and acquaintances as could enjoy themselves without much display. Then it was an ideal house for a party. A big quaint old-fashioned mansion with a large, square hall, and a broad oak staircase, which seemed just the right place for "couples" to rest between the dances; while the large dining-room, which had once—when the house was a priory—been the refectory, was just right for dancing. Dr. Clive had secured his house for a very low rent because, the property being in Chancery, no one had the power to grant a long lease of it, and few people cared to furnish such a large abode with the knowledge they might have to move at six months' notice.

However, the Clives had lived at the Priory for seven years, and there seemed every chance of their staying for seven more. Lucy was proud of her house, and she beamed on her guests with a smiling face on this last night of the old year, well pleased to see that Mr. Hurst had eyes for no one but Kathleen, and that Violet Nairn was trying to talk to the stern, silent elder brother.

"Violet is a darling girl," thought Mrs. Clive, "but I wouldn't have believed even she could thaw an iceberg like Dermot Rutherford!"

And the young man himself was surprised at the fascination Miss Nairn had for him. There were far prettier girls present—his own sister, for instance—but to Dermot Violet was the sweetest face in the room.

They were sitting out together during a dance, and he found himself telling her of his coming change—how he was soon to leave Stoneleigh and make his home with his godfather.

"Kathleen will miss me very much," he said, gravely. "She and I have always pulled together. I wish you would be friends with her, Miss Nairn; she has so few girl friends, and you seem just of an age."

"I should like it very much," said Violet, "but I don't expect to be at the Priory very long."

"I thought you were going to live with the Clives!"

"They are kind enough to wish it; but I don't like the idea of living on charity. I tell Lucy this is just a pleasant holiday, and when Christmas time is past I mean to look out for a situation."

"You mustn't think of such a thing—you are much too young!"

She smiled.

"I am much too old to be a burden on my cousins. I meant to take a situation as soon as I got to England. I was so glad to come home I thought I should not mind anything; but after this glimpse of Lucy's home life I am afraid I shall be rather dull among strangers at first."

"Where did you live?" Dermot asked, suddenly. "Wasn't it in Africa?"

"Oh, no; much further off. My parents went to Australia when I was ten years old, and at their death a rich farmer, not far from Melbourne, adopted me as a kind of companion to his only child. I can't tell you how good Mr. Doyle was to me. He was just like a second father. He died this last October. I am still in mourning for him," and she touched the soft black drapery of her pretty dress.

Dermot started.

"You were Vana Doyle's companion!"

"Yes. How surprised you seem. Is it possible that you know her? She expected to be in England by Christmas."

"It is a very small world after all, Miss Nairn. Vana Doyle is staying with us. Her father and mine were old friends, and she is in some measure the Captain's ward."

"How very strange!" said Violet.

"I must tell her of this discovery. She will be delighted to see you again."

Violet blushed crimson.

"I do not think so. Vana never cared much for me, and when Mr. Doyle died she turned against me, and seemed only to want me to leave the Creek as soon as possible. You see," went on the girl, apologetically, "she is an heiress, and she thought a great deal of money, so I suppose it was natural she should look down on a girl who owed everything to her father."

"I wonder she has never spoken of you," said Dermot, who had not been present when Vana had mentioned her companion's death. "But there, she speaks very little of Australia."

"She never liked it. She was always eager to go to England, and after she knew Miss Winter she almost hated the colony."

"Who was Miss Winter?"

"A lady Vana met in Melbourne. She was staying with us when Mr. Doyle died. Vana was to come to England under her care. They were at Melbourne when I sailed."

"I hope you will come and see us," said Dermot, gravely; "unless you would rather not meet Miss Doyle?"

"I should like to see Vana again, but I would rather not make the first advance. You see she is rich, and she might think I wanted to be friends with her because of her money. And then my cousins are angry with her for sending me away so abruptly, so—"

"It would be awkward for you; but I may tell Miss Doyle of my discovery!"

"Yes; is Miss Winter also staying with you? I did not think Vana would have consented to part from her."

"I never heard the lady's name until to-night."

The music struck up the strain of a well-known waltz. Dermot and Violet danced with a strange sense of pleasure no dance had ever brought to them before. She was thinking how strong and brave he looked, a veritable knight of olden times, and Dermot was realizing dimly that old Lady Linton's words had indeed been true—love was best of all.

He had gone through his life thus far without knowing what love meant, but to-night, with Violet's slender form in his arms and her beautiful eyes looking into his, he felt that at last he had met his fate. Come weal, come woe, he had lost his heart once and for ever.

Mrs. Clive had provided a novel amusement for her guests when they tired of the mazes of the dance. The conservatory had been draped with flags, and the entrance screened with curtains, and within, on a three-legged stool, was seated a woman in a red cloak got up as a veritable gipsy. Really, she was a professional palmist, and figured in her advertisements as Mademoiselle Zuleka, but Mrs. Clive preferred English names, so she had chosen the homely costume and persuaded Mademoiselle to appear as Zilla the gipsy. At the entrance to the conservatory a board was placed, on which was painted, "To the cave of mystery," and when there came a pause in the dances the gipsy herself opened the door, and advancing with beckoning hand seemed to invite the guests to enter her temporary abode and learn their fate.

"It is a very witching hour to try one's fortune," said Mr. Hurst, "when the old year is so nearly ended. Who is going to be the first to offer a hand for Zilla's inspection? Mrs. Clive, won't you act us an example? The ladies are shy."

"I think I know my fate pretty well," said Lucy. "Someone else must volunteer. I can vouch for one thing," and she smiled pleasantly at the gipsy, "Zilla has made some very wonderful predictions in her time."

The gipsy laughed and showed some very white teeth. Then fixing her dark eyes on Kathleen Rutherford she seemed to invite her to approach.

"You will be a bride before the coming year has seen six moons," she said, in a musical voice with just the suspicion of a foreign accent. "You will never be very rich, but poverty will not trouble you."

Blushing crimson Katy would fain have retreated, but Zilla had taken her hand and was examining it attentively.

"A long life and a happy one," she said, cheerfully. "You'll turn your back on the shadows from to-night and walk in the sunshine. But I'll give you one warning: There's a serpent in your path you'd best beware of. Trust her not or you will rue the day!"

Mr. Hurst presented himself as the next candidate for the oracle, but Zilla declared she could see nothing interesting in his hand.

"You'll marry the girl you love and make her a very good husband on the whole, but you'll never set the Thames on fire. You are much too commonplace to be famous!"

Mr. Hurst and Kathleen moved away to give place to other inquirers. Dermot Rutherford, to his hostess's intense surprise, condescended to try his fate.

"I never would have thought it of you!" said Lucy. "I quite expected you to condemn my little amusement as dangerous and harmful!"

"I am not a prig!" returned Dermot. "I have no doubt the gipsy will say I am too commonplace to have a fortune, but I mean to try."

"Kathleen is to be a bride before next May. I hope you have realized that!"

"I will try to," he said, cheerfully; "but to imagine Stoneleigh without her is almost beyond my powers. The boys will have nineteen accidents a day, and soon not possess one whole suit between them."

Zilla had been regarding his hand meditatively. Suddenly she dropped it.

"There's a great danger threatens you, and it comes from a woman!"

"Evidently, my dear Rutherford, some fair unknown has designs on your heart," said Dr. Clive, cheerfully.

"A woman has marked you for her prey," said Zilla. "She is not here, but she is near this house. She has black hair, and her eyes are the colour of sloes. Be warned of her. She means harm to you and yours. When she is most friendly trust her not!"

Lucy Clive was amazed at Dermot's expression. It was very grave, and he listened attentively (she told Violet afterwards) as though he had believed every word the gipsy uttered.

"And if I escape this danger," he asked, cheerfully, "what then?"

"You will be rich and honoured. You will marry an heiress before next Christmas, and have more money than you can spend, besides a fair estate."

"What a delightful fate!" said one of the guests. "Couldn't you give us some description of the heiress? I might go in, you know, and try to cut him out."

But Zilla vouchsafed no reply. She addressed herself solely to Dermot.

"On Christmas Eve you received a ring to hold in trust for your wife. That ring will be needed soon. Take care of it!"

Many other guests patronized Zilla, but Dermot Rutherford did not trouble to listen to the fortunes promised them. He felt bewildered. He was a perfect sceptic where palmists and gipsies were concerned, but one thing had struck him greatly. Instead of giving vague indefinite promises, which committed her to nothing, Zilla had made three definite statements which a very short time would prove or disprove. Kathleen was to be married before the new year was six months old. He was to be united to an heiress before next Christmas, and he was to have an estate. No three predictions could have been fuller or more definite, while the woman against whom the gipsy had warned both Kathleen and himself *could* be no other than Vana Doyle.

But of this he was certain: Zilla had been quite wrong about his future bride. If ever he had a wedding day his wife would not be an heiress, but Mrs. Clive's pretty, portionless cousin.

CHAPTER VII.

It was not far from the Priory to Eastgate Road. Both were in that outlying district which, though its inhabitants love to call it Norwood, is yet far enough from Norwood proper. It was a clear frosty night, and the new year was just two hours old when Kathleen and Dermot set out to walk home, the blue crepon tucked carefully up, and a thick cloak covering its pale beauty. Many of the guests had cabs and suchlike conveyances, but Dermot and Kathleen much preferred to walk with the clear sky above them spangled with myriads of stars and no one about but themselves—for it so happened none of the other guests lived near Stoneleigh.

"Have you enjoyed yourself, Katy?"

"Oh, Dermot, I never enjoyed anything so much—I am so happy and yet so miserable!"

Dermot looked at his sister as though he suspected her of dementia.

"My dear child," he said, soberly, "you can't be happy and miserable both."

"But I am—Mr. Hurst—I mean. I don't know what I am saying."

A sudden light broke on Dermot.

"Hurst is a right down good fellow," he said, kindly, "and if he loves you and you care for him, I don't see anything to make you miserable."

"Oh, Dermot—papa! Kenneth is not rich, and if papa came worrying him for money I should wish myself in my grave!"

"Poor little girl!" He was silent just a moment, then he asked, gently,

"Did you refuse Mr. Hurst, Katy?"

"Yes—but he would make me tell him why, and he said it did not matter. He declares he is very firm, and could say 'No' once for all to the Captain."

"If only he would do that—I don't see, Katy, why your life should be blighted just because of the family troubles."

"If only papa would go to Ireland and look after the estates," said Katy.

"My dear little sister, I sometimes doubt if the estates exist anywhere but in his imagination. Kathleen, don't wreck your life's happiness for a mere scruple. I grant it would be wrong to marry Hurst without telling him the exact truth, but if he knows our father's amiable weakness," this with a bitter smile, "and is willing to take the risk, I think you might chance it. The Captain is fond of you to a certain extent, and he might abstain from preying on your husband, though he thinks he has a perfect right to share all I possess. Then the matter would be on your side."

"Kenneth is coming to see papa to-morrow. Oh, Dermot, I hope he will be nice to him."

"Why not? The Captain believes in matrimony."

"But he has never seemed to like Kenneth."

"Because he owes Messrs. Clive and Hurst a good long bill for medical attendance, and it is one of his 'little ways' to dislike anyone to whom he owes money—by the way, Katy, your lover will be expected to lecture the whole family gratis. I hope he is prepared for that."

She smiled in the moonlight.

"If that were all—"

"Now you are not to despond," said Dermot. "With me and the mater to pitch into him when we suspect him of preying on you, and Hurst strong-minded enough to put his foot down and refuse money, I really think the Captain may become quite a tolerable father-in-law. Of course he'll quote King Lear (with himself in the title-role) and talk about your ingratitude being sharper than a serpent's tooth. But that won't do you much harm."

"Don't let's go home yet," pleaded Kathleen. "I have so much to say. Did you hear what the gipsy told me?"

"Rather! You are to be Mrs. Hurst before the merry month of May."

"I didn't mean that. Didn't you hear her warn me?"

"She warned me too. I don't believe in fortune-telling or palmistry either, Kathleen, but I am bound to say I felt a little staggered that she should warn us both so pointedly against the same person."

"Meaning Vana Doyle?"

"Yes——. By the way, Katy, Mrs. Clive's cousin lived with the Doyles in Australia. She was Vana's companion, and only left when the old man died."

"But Vana's companion died at Melbourne just before she sailed for England."

"Miss Nairn was her companion, but she spoke of a Miss Winter in whose care Vana was to travel to England. Perhaps she died!"

"Dermot—do you think Vana knows that Violet Nairn is with the Clives?"

"Yes; I mentioned her myself."

"Then she does not want to meet her! When this party was first mentioned she seemed quite eager to get an invitation. Then later she declared she could not go to any gaiety so soon after her father's death. She must have heard then Miss Nairn was at the Priory."

"But why should she want to avoid her?"

Kathleen shivered.

"I don't know—I can't make it out; but, Dermot, I am afraid of Vana Doyle. I don't mean because of Zilla's warning, but from the very first night of Vana's coming I had a kind of dread of her; and, Dermot, she has the most marvellous influence over papa, and—I believe he borrows money of her."

Dermot groaned.

"Has she been to Mr. Doyle's agents yet, Kathleen?"

"No; she says she shall not trouble to go near them till she wants some more money, and she has plenty for the present."

"You see," said Dermot, ruefully, "we can't prevent her lending the Captain money. I have cautioned her myself, but she wouldn't listen."

"She generally does listen to what you say."

"Kathleen, what do you mean?"

"Don't be angry, Dermot, but I believe Vana likes you, and I am positive papa has suggested your marrying her."

"He couldn't," objected Dermot. "He must have some sense of propriety."

"But he would think such a match the essence of propriety. Dermot, I must be over-anxious, but I feel frightened when I think of it. I am certain Vana Doyle would make you miserable, and yet I seem to feel you will marry her."

"Which shows that you are a goose," said Dermot, good-naturedly, "and just now you are a very weary goose, and I am quite sure your fiancé would not approve of my keeping you tramping about at this hour of the morning; so, Kathleen, we'll go home and postpone the further discussion of the heiress till to-morrow."

They were soon at Stoneleigh. After their recent conversation it was rather a shock to find that Miss Doyle, having offered to sit up for them, everyone else had gone to bed. Vana had kept up a lovely fire, and some hot coffee was just ready for the revellers. She waited on them with a charming grace, making Dermot feel they must surely have misjudged her.

She was a most fascinating creature, and she put forth all her powers of captivation that night to ensnare Dermot's fancy. Had he been heart-whole she might have succeeded, but even while Vana spoke in her sweetest, most caressing tones Violet Nairn's face rose up before him, and prevented his being attracted by the woman who had certainly treated her with harshness.

Coffee seemed to have a very soothing effect on Kathleen. In a few moments she was slumbering fast in her chair. Her bodily presence might chaperon the other two, but, as far as anything else went they were *à-tête*.

"We met a friend of yours to-night," said Dermot, wondering what effect the words would have on Vana. "A Miss Nairn. She is staying with the Clives."

"Poor Violet! I am glad she is with friends," said Vana, gently. "Hers is such a sad story. I always felt sorry for her."

This was certainly not what Dermot had expected.

"She lived with you a long time in Australia, didn't she?"

"More than seven years. Her parents died within a month of each other, and my father brought her home to be a kind of sister to me."

"I wonder you did not return to England together!" hazarded Dermot.

"Our friendship came to a sudden end at my father's death," said Vana, frankly. "My companion and duenna, Miss Winter, unfortunately offended Violet. She did not know the poor girl's history, or how careful we had to be."

"What do you mean?" demanded Dermot. "As Mrs. Clive's cousin, there can be nothing strange in Miss Nairn's history."

"Mrs. Clive is the niece of Violet's father," said Miss Doyle, with marked emphasis. "It is very probable she does not know the extent of the family misfortune herself. Mrs. Nairn died raving mad, and had suffered from

frequent attacks of insanity during the three last years of her life. That was the true reason of the family coming to Australia. Mr. Nairn could not bear for the truth to be known to his friends. He thought he could keep the secret better among strangers. He told the whole story to my father, and begged him to give Violet a home. She was so like her mother in appearance and temperament there seemed every fear she would inherit her disease. Mr. Nairn thought that in the free open life led on an Australian sheep farm there would be less fear of her developing the seeds of insanity."

Not by word or look would Dermot interrupt her, and she resumed.

"Mrs. Nairn had one of her worst attacks at the time of her husband's death. In three days she was dead too, killed by her own hand. The truth was mercifully kept from Violet. She believes her mother died of grief for her father's death. Directly after the funeral my father brought Violet to the Creek, and for seven long years she was treated in all things as my sister. Just before my father died a very attractive and accomplished lady came on a visit to us. Violet conceived the idea that Miss Winter wanted to oust her from her place in our home and fill it herself. Miss Winter was a person of means, and would never have accepted such a post, but she did not like Violet, and would not condescend to explain this. Not knowing the fate which threatened the poor girl, she made no allowances for her, and the result was that Violet had a terrible attack of madness. She attempted Miss Winter's life, and at last I was so frightened and terrified at her state that I begged our clergyman to remove her to a hospital or some such place where she could be properly looked after. He, however, was of opinion that a change of scene and new surroundings would effect a cure, so he persuaded a friend of his own who was returning to England to employ the girl as nursery governess in return for her passage. He declared she would be cured as soon as she set foot on board. I must say I doubted it. I grudge Violet nothing. I would have shared my last shilling with her, but, remember, I had seen her attempt Miss Winter's life. I knew what she was during her attacks. I would gladly have paid her expenses at a sanatorium, but I dared not take the responsibility of the care of her. I know that her nearest relation had married a Dr. Clive, and when I heard Kathleen mention her friend's name I thought it might be the same. Of course, for the sake of the family, the Clives would keep poor Violet's malady a secret. I have no wish to brazen it abroad, but—you and Kathleen are my nearest friends—it is only fair to warn you."

It was impossible to tell from Dermot's face whether the warning had been effectual. His expression was perfectly inscrutable. Only when Vana paused he asked gravely,—

"What became of your friend Miss Winter?"

"She died at Melbourne just before the steamer sailed. She was buried the next day, and I went on board directly after the funeral. Our luggage was already there, and, having lost my friend, I felt so desolate and alone I was only too thankful to leave Melbourne."

Kathleen stirred uneasily in her sleep, and some broken words escaped her,—

"A serpent in my path—beware!"

Dermot bent over her with a strange smile.

"Better dream in bed, Katy," he said, affectionately. Then as his sister roused herself, surprised at her slumbers, he linked his hand in hers and led her from the room, wishing Miss Doyle a calm good-night.

Little did Vana guess that Katy's broken words had defeated her well-laid plot. Her story was so detailed, so plausible, that Dermot was well nigh convinced, till Katy recalled to him the gipsy's warning.

No. He would not believe in Violet Nairn's insanity till assured of it by another voice than Vana's.

He did not offer his hand to the Australian heiress as he wished her "good-night." Somehow he could not. As he looked at her dusky beauty he felt a sensation of loathing and repulsion.

Kenneth Hurst called the next evening and was received by Captain Rutherford in solemn state alone in the drawing-room.

Denis Rutherford was most condescending. He made many allusions to his royal ancestors (antwile kings of Ireland), and to the castle and estates in Galway none of his children had ever seen. He assured Mr. Hurst his eldest daughter should have looked higher; but, alas! his fortunes had fallen, and he was unable to give her the opportunities merited by her birth, so, since her affections were engaged, he would not refuse his consent, though he had never expected one of his children to be intimately connected with pills.

A bad-tempered man would certainly have told the Captain a few home truths. A proud one would have been miserable under his show of condescension; but Kenneth Hurst was blessed with an equable temper, and had more common sense than pride. He thought the Captain's pretensions ridiculous, but tried to be patient with Kathleen's father. When he got a chance to speak he told Denis Rutherford the amount of his private fortune (which he intended to settle on Kathleen) and the sum he received at present from the practice. He said simply he considered the income sufficient to start on if a young couple were economical and steered clear of three things: debt, borrowing, and lending.

Captain Rutherford gave no sign that he considered this little speech a reflection on himself, but promised grandiloquently that when his ship came home his eldest daughter should have a handsome marriage-portion—a promise in which Kenneth Hurst put not the smallest trust.

CHAPTER VIII.

PERHAPS it was natural that Kathleen's engagement should cause a greater intimacy between the Priory and Stoneleigh. The wedding was fixed for February, in view of which Dermot had deferred removing to Mr. Finch's until after his sister had left home. He was strangely conscious of some-

thing strained and unnatural in the domestic atmosphere, and wished with all his heart that Miss Doyle would weary of the poverty-stricken household and migrate to surroundings more befitting an heiress.

She never reverted to her warning, but Dermot felt certain she knew whenever he had been to the Priory. Her eyes cast a strange, mocking glance at him on his return, as though to ask what pleasure he could find in the society of a mad woman. Dermot had never hinted at the terrible story he had heard from Vana. He would not whisper a part of it even to Katy, but all the same, he could not forget it. It haunted him night and day. In Violet's society he told himself it was false—a cruel slander; but, away from her, the doubts would recur. So many women, beautiful and gifted in all else, had suffered from the curse of insanity. What object could Vana have had in inventing such a story? True the gipsy had warned him of her, but then she was not infallible.

One word to Dr. Clive and his wife and Dermot would have been at rest, but that word was difficult to speak. There is nothing people so resent as a hint that there is insanity in their family, while if the charge were false Dermot felt they would be so greatly incensed as never to speak to him again.

Unwittingly Violet herself did something to confirm the poor fellow's fears. She shrank from all mention of a meeting with Vana Doyle, and after that first evening she would never speak of her Australian home, or her last days in Melbourne. It seemed to Dermot she wanted to throw a veil over her past and begin her life afresh with her return to England.

"My dear Lucy," said Dr. Clive, one January evening when everyone but the married pair had gone to bed, and he was smoking a last pipe in his particular den, with his wife opposite him, "has it ever struck you we had better alter the name of our house?"

"Certainly not!" said Lucy, unsuspiciously. "The Priory suits it admirably."

"I think the Lovers' Retreat would be far better, or Turtle Dove Lodge. Pray, Lucy, are you aware that you have two couples of sentimental young people on your hand? Kathleen Rutherford will be Mrs. Hurst shortly, and as love-making would be impossible at Stoneleigh, I suppose I must be hospitable and let my partner do his courtship here. But what about your cousin and Dermot Rutherford?"

Mrs. Clive opened her eyes to their widest extent.

"Dermot will never marry anyone; he is much too gloomy and reserved to fall in love."

"I can't dispute the first part of your sentence, not being in Mr. Rutherford's confidence. I can't say if he intends to marry or not, but on the second question I am an authority. If I ever saw a man in love Mr. Rutherford is that individual!"

"He is not half nice enough for Violet."

"I like him very much myself, but—I confess his manner puzzles me. One night he is so devoted I expected to be asked for my consent (I suppose I stand in the place of her father) to his marriage. The next Mr. Rutherford avoids her by every means in his power—hardly speaks to her, but sits as far apart from her as the size of our rooms permit, and glances at the rest of the company after the manner of a savage dog."

"Tom, he is not so bad as that."

"I am not aware that I accused him of being 'bad' at all. He is in love with Violet, that I will swear to. Does he intend to marry her? If not, it would be more prudent to let them meet less often. He is just the sort of fellow to take a girl's fancy, and we don't want our pretty cousin left to wear the willow."

"I believe Miss Doyle is at the bottom of it," said Lucy, thoughtfully. "Isn't it strange, Tom, how both Kathleen and her brother avoid speaking of the heiress?"

"Captain Rutherford wants his son to marry her, and she is reported to be more than willing, so probably the situation is a trifle awkward for a modest young man," suggested the doctor. "I rather fancy Miss Doyle was more unkind to Violet than she has confessed to us. Have you noticed the girl seems positively frightened when she is mentioned?"

Miss Doyle meanwhile showed no intention of leaving Stoneleigh. She was still a prime favourite with the Captain, but no one else in the house liked her. Even frequent bribes of sweets and pence had failed to convert the boys to her service. They eyed her askance, and were always demanding of their mother, "when that horrid girl was going?"

Captain Rutherford had pressed Vana to remain for Kathleen's wedding on the second of February, and she had consented at once. She really made herself very useful in helping with the preparations, which were perforce humble, as Mr. Finch's Christmas present to Dermot was all that could be devoted to his sister's trousseau.

The very morning after Mrs. Clive's tête-à-tête with her husband, Vana had been engaged in writing letters—a most unusual employment with her. When she had finished she announced her intention of going to London to see a friend.

"I may be away two or three days," she said, with a charming smile; "or I may return to-morrow night."

"I did not know you had any friends in England," said Nora, who was an adept at making uncomfortable remarks, but Vana explained she had met Mrs. Derwent on the voyage home, and had struck up a great friendship for her.

No one at Stoneleigh attempted to control the movements of the heiress, so Vana went to London without leaving any further information as to her movements; but the impetuous Irish family would have been more than a little puzzled had they followed their guest, the girl whom they believed had only spent a fortnight in England, and hardly knew her way to any place in London.

Taking her small travelling bag in her hand Vana hailed an omnibus at

London Bridge station and alighted in a populous eastern suburb. She walked a few yards till she came to a house with a brass plate on the door inscribed,

MR. MATHEWS.
House Agent and Auctioneer.

The dwelling had once been a private residence. The ground floor was now used as offices, but the business was a very small one, and a boy clerk besides the principal completed the staff.

Evidently Vana Doyle was no stranger there, for Mr. Mathews greeted her with a careless kiss.

"Back again, old girl! I thought you had fallen on your feet at last, and meant to end your days at the Antipodes."

"I was obliged to come home," she answered, coldly, for she did not want him to know more of her secrets than she could help; "but I didn't do so badly, Reuben. I made five hundred pounds in hard cash, and I stand to win two or three thousand a year if you will assist me!"

"Very happy to hear it. Who is the happy man? Of course you mean you'll win the fortune by marriage?"

"Yes, but to make things secure I must be married before the fifth of February."

"And is he a laggard in love?"

"Don't be absurd! Listen to me. To carry out my plans I require the use of a well-appointed house for one week. It must be in the country and some distance from the station. I am willing to pay as much as twenty pounds for the accommodation. Have you anything on your books to suit? You understand why I come to you? I want no awkward questions asked. The money is ready. I shall do no injury to the premises. You need not inform your client even that you have let his house, but might silently pocket the money."

"I can't in the least understand what you are driving at!"

"I daresay not. Well, have you such a house, and are you disposed to help me? because, if not, I can go elsewhere!"

Mr. Mathews hesitated.

"You are not after any of your old games? I don't want a scandal."

"I am not going to make one."

"Well," he still spoke rather reluctantly, "I've a place on the books that might suit you—Woodbine Cottage it's called, but it's not like a cottage. There are twelve rooms, and it stands in grounds seven miles from a station, and with no houses near. I don't mind telling you, there was a murder committed there last year, and since that no one will take the place for love or money. It's a gem of a house, and beautifully kept. It belongs to an old lady whom her sons can't induce to part with it. A woman from the village goes in once a week to dust and clean, but nothing would induce her to stay there after dark. If you take the old place, Cora, you'll have to bring your own servants, or wait on yourself."

"It sounds as though it would do," said the heiress, thoughtfully. "Is it far from London?"

"Thirty miles. It is seven miles from Norton, a large station on the Great Eastern main line. All the trains nearly call there, and when once you get to the station you are in London in no time."

"I think it will do," said the girl the Rutherfords knew as Vana Doyle.

"I suppose the woman you mentioned would come in for an hour or two every day. And could I get any sort of conveyance from the station?"

"You can hire from the 'Railway Hotel,' at Norton very reasonably."

"And I can have the keys to-night?"

"This minute if you like." He looked at her keenly. "You'll remember I've turned over a new leaf and am a hard-working business-man nowadays! Don't betray me!"

"I won't!" she said, slowly. "Shall I give you the money now?"

She counted twenty sovereigns into his out-stretched hand. Reuben Mathews was poor, and just a little unscrupulous, but had he even guessed the cruel plot hatching in her busy brain he would have flung back the money indignantly, and turned it's author out of his office with loathing and contempt.

Vana chartered a cab and drove to a theatrical costumier's near Covent Garden, where she made sundry purchases. Then she went to Liverpool Street station, partook of an excellent meal, and travelled to Norton by the five o'clock train in the best of spirits.

She slept that night at the "Railway Hotel," winning golden opinions from the landlady. When it was known, however, that she had taken Woodbine Cottage, the good woman shook her head.

"You'll never stay there, ma'am. It's a pretty place enough in summer, but it was always dreary in winter, and since the murder last year it gives me the creeps even to think of being there!"

But Vana Doyle assured her she was not afraid of ghosts. She meant to stay at Woodbine Cottage, but if she began to feel scared she should just go back to London. She made arrangements for hiring a smart little pony-carriage, and was finally driven over in it to her new abode, the man who acted as charioteer evidently regarding her as a miracle of courage.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. FINCH and his managing clerk were discussing an important case. When all that had to be arranged respecting it was settled, the older lawyer asked, gravely,—

"And when are you coming to me, Dermot—the day after Kathleen's wedding, eh?"

"If you please," said Dermot, earnestly. "Heaven knows I shall be thankful to turn my back on Stoneleigh."

"That's a very good-looking girl your mother has got staying with her?"

Dermot winced.

"A beauty and an heiress. Captain Rutherford informed me also that she was to be his daughter-in-law."

"She won't be that, sir—unless she waits for Horace!" (Dermot's half-brother was twelve years old).

"Well," said Mr. Finch, thoughtfully, "I should be sorry if you married her."

"I shall not do that. Why didn't you like her, Mr. Finch? The Captain swears by her."

The old lawyer played idly with the paper-knife in his hand as he answered,—

"I am a bit of a physiognomist, my boy, and Miss Doyle has the makings of a bad woman, if I am any judge. Oh, don't ask me how I know it for I can't tell you. Then she bears an extraordinary resemblance to a woman who, three years ago, was the heroine of *cause célèbre*. Good gracious, Dermot, surely you remember the great Paris gambling case!"

Mr. Rutherford shook his head.

"Three years ago I was studying for my final. I don't think I read anything but law books for weeks before the examination."

"Well, it was a shameful affair. The son of a rich Englishman married an adventuress, and being cut by his family and reduced to penury, tried to gain a living by teaching his own language in Paris. His wife—unknown to him—ran a private gambling hell. It was discovered by the police, who, as her husband—madams having actually taken the rooms in his name—conceived him to be the guilty party. Disgusted with the knowledge of his idol's true character, and overwhelmed with shame at his own position, the poor fellow put a bullet through his brains. The police found that by some technical flaw the woman couldn't be prosecuted, and she got off scot free. Her picture was in all the papers that go in for that sort of thing, and, as I tell you, it is so like Miss Doyle that she might have sat for it!"

"What became of—the wife?"

"She emigrated, I believe. Someone told me she became a teacher in a ladies' school—a pretty teacher!"

"Well," said Dermot slowly. "I never liked Miss Doyle, I may say that, from the first moment of our meeting. I had a nameless aversion to her, which my sister Kathleen fully shares. But I am bound to say she has been a most kindly friend and assistant in all the wedding preparations. No one could have been less trouble in a house, or more ready to be just like one of the family. Sometimes I try to think our aversion to her is a morbid fancy; at others I feel it is a warning sent to guard us against some unknown peril."

"Is she going to spend her life at Stoneleigh?" demanded Mr. Finch. "You had better be careful, Dermot. She is a very fascinating young woman!"

"I am not afraid—the truth is, sir, I possess a magic spell against Miss Doyle's fascinations. I am in love with someone else!"

"I thought you didn't believe in love?"

"I didn't."

"And now you are engaged?"

"Not engaged!"

"Do you mean to say she has refused you?"

"I haven't asked her!"

"Is she a great heiress, that you are afraid to try your fate?"

"She is penniless, and lives on the kindness of some cousins—Dr. Clive and his wife—who are our near neighbours."

"Well, your income is quite enough to start quietly. What are you waiting for, young man?"

No answer.

"You have seemed very gloomy and abstracted lately," went on Mr. Finch; "and I have wondered what was wrong. Now that the ice is broken, you had better make a clean breast of everything."

And he did. He told Mr. Finch of his love for Violet, of her sweetness and goodness, her grace and beauty. He should never love another as he loved her. With her at his side he would have faced poverty and hardship, and yet he dared not plead his cause because of Vana Doyle's story.

The lawyer listened, very gravely until Dermot had finished. Then he gave his verdict promptly and decidedly.

"Young man, you are an imbecile!"

"I feel like one sometimes," said Dermot, not in the least offended by this very plain speaking. "You see I go over things again and again till I get dazed."

"And yet the truth lies in a nutshell. Miss Doyle wants to marry you, and so she invented this story to part you from the other girl—you haven't told me her name."

"Violet Nairn." (Mr. Finch started as he heard it, but this was lost on Dermot.) "She is Mrs. Clive's first cousin."

"Then Doctor Clive could have set your fears at rest at once."

"I was afraid to ask him. If only I had known anyone in Australia I would have written out and asked for particulars of Mrs. Nairn's death."

"Australia is a pretty big place, young man. A thousand people might live there and yet be miles away from the place where Mrs. Nairn lived."

"Violet spent the last seven years of her life with the DoYLES at the Creek, a farm about seventy miles from Melbourne. She came to England in December with a Mrs. Ainslie, whose husband has a post out there."

"Why didn't you say so before? Mrs. Ainslie is my niece, and I know she did bring a young lady home to help her with the children. Bless my

soul, Rutherford, the world's a very small place after all! Bessie Ainslie can set all your doubts at rest, and she is staying with me at Sydenham at this very time. Come round to dinner to-morrow (she'll be out to-night) and hear all she can tell you."

Dermot's face lighted up.

"And you think it will be all right?"

"I can tell you this much: My niece is a delicate, nervous woman, with an intense dread of any mental disease. She was just convalescent after her baby's birth, and was returning to England mainly for her health. Miss Nairn (I never heard the name, but of course it is the same, she only brought home one young lady) was recommended by a clergyman and doctor. Now, would any two men, knowing my niece's state, suffer her to engage a companion who was just out of an attack of mania?"

"Then you think—"

"I think 'faint heart never won a fair lady,' and that your heart is uncommonly faint. I don't want to make you conceited, but to me the story is plain. Miss Doyle was smitten with your *beaux yeux*, and spared no deceit to part you from her rival."

"I'll go to the Priory to-night," said Dermot cheerfully. "And, if you'll let me, I will come round to Sydenham to tell you of my success."

Old Finch chuckled.

"Well, I shall be at home, though Bessie will be out gallivanting. But you won't come, Dermot. If the lady says 'yes,' you'll be too happy to forsake her company for a grim old lawyer's."

Miss Doyle had been away two days, and the family at Stoneleigh did not know when she proposed to return. It was astonishing what a relief her absence seemed to Mrs. Rutherford and the girls. They felt as if their home really belonged to them once more.

"I can't help it!" said Nora, when her father reproved her for some speech of this sort. "I am so tired of being on company manners."

Captain Rutherford assured her frankly she had no manners at all, company or otherwise. But the opinion of the majority was certainly on Nora's side, and so the descendant of the Irish kings as certainly had the worst of the argument.

It was striking eight when Dermot rang the Priory bell. He asked for Mrs. Clive, and was ushered at once into the drawing-room.

"Isn't it wonderful to find me alone?" the pretty little matron asked, as she rose to welcome him. "Violet has forsaken me. She went off suddenly this morning to spend a few days with a friend, and—you can't believe how I miss her!"

Dermot could believe it perfectly. His errand was, of course, fruitless, but he liked Mrs. Clive, and did not object to a few minutes' chat with her. Besides, he could hardly be rude enough to depart because her cousin was away. So he sat down and began to talk on indifferent subjects. But somehow his thoughts were so full of Violet that unconsciously his conversation drifted back to her.

"I found out to-day that the lady with whom Miss Nairn returned to England is my employer's niece. She is staying with him at Sydenham, and he has invited me to dine there to-morrow and meet her."

But Dermot was not prepared for the effect of his words on Mrs. Clive. She dropped her work—a fancy pinafore for the baby—and looked up at him in alarm.

"You must surely be mistaken, Mr. Rutherford! Violet came home with a Mrs. Ainslie, whose husband is a magistrate near Melbourne."

"I know: she is Mr. Finch's niece, and has brought her five little girls on a visit to him."

"But you said he lived at Sydenham."

"Yes," said Dermot, bewildered, "so he does. He has a very pleasant house close to the Palace. I am going to live with him after Katy leaves us."

"But Violet has gone on a visit to Mrs. Ainslie," said the doctor's wife, much perplexed. "The invitation came yesterday, and she said she had taken a furnished house at Wainleigh, and wanted Violet to spend a week with her. She fixed the train and everything."

Dermot's perplexity fully equalled Lucy's. What could he think? Mrs. Ainslie was certainly staying with her uncle at Sydenham, yet an invitation had been sent in her name from a country house.

"Where is Wainleigh?" he asked, bewildered.

"A few miles from Chelmsford. There is no post-office, so Violet was asked to telegraph to Chelmsford, 'to be called for.' Wainleigh, however, is the railway station."

They looked at each other in blank dismay.

"Let me call Tom," said Mrs. Clive; "he must have finished his nap by this time. He was up all last night, and so he went to lie down for an hour. Mr. Rutherford, tell me I am foolish and that Violet must be safe, for I feel terribly frightened."

"I think I had better go round to Mr. Finch," said Dermot slowly, "and tell him this; but I will wait to see if Dr. Clive can suggest any better plan."

Tom Clive listened with a very grave face. A far more stolid matter-of-fact man than Dermot Rutherford, he was yet strangely alarmed.

"I never liked that letter," he said slowly. "It came yesterday morning, and there would have been ample time to answer it by post. I couldn't see why Violet was to telegraph."

"You see," said Lucy, "it leaves us practically with no address beyond Wainleigh."

"Wainleigh is a small place," said the doctor, "and no doubt everyone knows their neighbours, while Violet is uncommon enough in appearance to have been noticed by the porter. No, what I don't like is that anyone should send our poor little cousin a forged invitation—for that's what it amounts to."

"I had better go to Mr. Finch," said Dermot.

"I'll go with you," said Dr. Clive, ringing the bell to order the brougham. "We had better drive, it will be quicker in the end."

In the silence of that drive Dermot Rutherford made his confession.

"I came to your house to-night to ask Miss Nairn to be my wife. I don't know what you will say to my secret. I am not a rich man, but I love her with all my heart."

"I thought as much," returned Tom. "To tell you the truth, I guessed your secret days ago, and fancied love and ambition were having a battle in your heart."

"It was not that—I should have spoken days ago, but I was cruelly deceived."

"Not by Violet?"

"No—by one who knew her well. Vana Doyle assured me that the late Mrs. Nairn died insane; that her daughter inherited the malady, and had had an attack of acute mania just before she left Australia."

"How women hate each other!" said the doctor. "Vana Doyle robbed Violet of the five thousand pounds her father left his adopted child. I should have thought that injury enough."

"You don't despise me for my caution?"

"No—but pray is it Violet's present danger which has disarmed that caution?"

Dermot told him of his conversation with Mr. Finch, adding,—

"I know that as Violet's guardian you have a right to resent my prudence, but—"

"I have seen too much of the curse of insanity not to feel for you," said Dr. Clive gravely. "But, Mr. Rutherford, the young lady you call Vana Doyle must be a fiend."

"I agree with you. But why do you speak of her like that? She is Vana Doyle."

"Well," said the doctor gravely, "I begin to think she is not, and that your whole family have been the victim of a very clever imposture. If your father's guest is the real true, Vana Doyle, what earthly object has she in injuring Violet?"

"But—"

"Hear me out. To the real Vana Doyle Violet's future would be a matter of complete indifference. But an impostor might have most urgent reasons for wishing to get rid of the only person who could unmask her perfidy."

"I am positive you have some theory in your mind," said Dermot. "Won't you trust me with it?"

"Well—look here! For some three weeks Vana Doyle (so-called) and Violet have been living within two miles of each other, their respective homes visit, attend the same church, patronise the same shops, use the same railway station. Is it not passing strange, then, that in all this time the two girls have never met face to face? Can such a thing be natural? Or has one of them gone out of her way to avoid a meeting? I can truthfully say in the latter case that one is not Violet."

Mr. Finch looked a little surprised when he saw Dermot's companion. Dr. Clive was spokesman, and the lawyer listened to him with great attention.

"My niece will not be home till half-past ten. Will you wait and see her? But I tell you plainly I will stake my oath she never wrote that letter. How could she, when the day it was written and posted at Wainleigh she never left this house? And yesterday, when she should have been at Chelmsford awaiting Miss Nairn's telegram, she spent the day with the children at the Crystal Palace?"

"Have you ever heard of Wainleigh?" asked Dr. Clive. "I know nothing but the bare fact that it has a railway station."

"At which trains stop by signal," said the lawyer. "I have heard of Wainleigh. Last year a most dastardly murder was committed at Woodbine Cottage, a lonely house in the neighbourhood."

"But Woodbine Cottage was described as near Norton station," objected Dr. Clive.

"Norton is a more important station, and was the one at which the murderer tried to escape. But Wainleigh is two miles nearer the cottage as the crow flies. Both stations are near a good hunting neighbourhood, but the country round is not at all an attractive residence for a lady and children in the depth of winter."

"Will you give us your advice, Sir?" said Dr. Clive eagerly. "I confess I am utterly at fault. I must do something. I love the girl as a sister, and my wife is devoted to her. I can't go home and tell Mrs. Clive that I have not lifted a finger to find her cousin."

"You had better go to Wainleigh the first thing to-morrow and make inquiries. You can find out at Chelmsford who fetched the telegram. Wainleigh station is so small your cousin must have been noticed by the porter."

"Why not go to-night?"

"There happens to be no train. You can go down with the newspapers in the morning. Get out at Chelmsford, and inquire at the post-office as soon as it is open. Even then you'll be in time for the first train to Wainleigh."

"Hurst will take my patients," began Dr. Clive. But Mr. Finch interrupted him.

"You must let me accompany you, doctor. As my niece's name has been made use of so unwarrantably, I am most anxious to solve the mystery. Besides, I have been to Wainleigh before and know something of the neighbourhood."

"I must go!" pleaded Dermot. And as it happened to be Saturday, and a leisure time, Mr. Finch consented that the office should be left to his partner and the junior clerks.

"What am I to say to my wife?" asked Tom Clive in despair.

"Tell her that in a little place like Wainleigh we are sure to find

her cousin. Now let me ask you. "Had Miss Nairn any enemies besides the lady who so traduced her to my godson?"

"You mean Vana Doyle?"

"I do!"

"To the best of my knowledge Violet had not an enemy in the world. Miss Doyle and her companion, Miss Winter, had been cruelly unkind to the girl, but her path and theirs had diverged so far apart I should have thought they would have left her in peace."

"Miss Winter is dead," said Dermot gravely. "So we have only to deal with Vana Doyle."

But he had given Dr. Clive the missing clue.

Tom jumped up impulsively.

"I told you just now the girl your father had received as his old friend's daughter was not Vana Doyle at all. I can go a step further now and tell you her real name. She is Cora Winter, the person Miss Doyle met at a Melbourne boarding-house and took to the Creek, where she had an evil influence on her hostess, and did her best to torture Violet Nairn. Cora Winter is your guest, Mr. Rutherford, and the real Vana Doyle lies sleeping in Australia."

"But the fraud would be discovered so easily," objected Dermot, "no woman would be mad enough to risk it."

The doctor looked him steadily in the face.

"If Miss Doyle died just before the ship sailed, her companion could go on board under her name. If anyone suspected anything and cabled inquiries to the Creek on landing, it would still take six weeks for an answer to reach England. Humanly speaking, the adventuress was safe for six weeks. In that time she intended to marry you and enjoy Mr. Doyle's fortune as your queen-consort, if ever a day came when she could no longer enjoy it in her own right."

"But—"

Tom interrupted him.

"Is it possible you don't know, that if Vana Doyle died unmarried, by her father's will his whole fortune reverted to the eldest son of his old friend Denis Rutherford?"

Dermot gave a smothered sigh, almost like a sob. All along he had asked himself what motive Vana could have in trying to part him from Violet. Alas! the motive was clear now. The guilty woman knew that at any moment she might be stripped of her spoils, and wanted to give herself a clear title to the Doyle property as his wife.

From that moment Dermot despaired of his little love's safety. She felt sure she was a prisoner in her rival's power.

CHAPTER X.

WHEN Violet Nairn alighted at Wainleigh station the winter sun was shining brightly, and the little place looked its best. Not a creature was on the platform except herself and the solitary porter, and the girl felt a thrill of alarm at finding Mrs. Ainslie had not come to meet her, for Violet knew nothing of the country, and the thought of having to find her way alone to her friend's house distressed her; but when the porter took her ticket he volunteered the information that "there was a trap outside to take a lady to Mrs. Ainslie's;" and thus reassured Violet passed through the booking-office in a much happier frame of mind.

It was a sweet little pony carriage, and the boy in attendance had what looked like a brand new livery. He was a dark Spanish-looking lad, very good looking, and superior in manners. But Violet took a great aversion to him; she could not have told why, but his dark, glittering eyes frightened her; perhaps because they reminded her a little of Cora Winter, the woman whom of all others she had most feared.

It was a long drive—or it seemed so to Violet. The groom maintained a respectful silence, and she had nothing to distract her attention from her own thoughts. The road was a lonely one, a winding lane with so many twists and turns it would have been well-nigh impossible for strangers to find their way.

They did not pass any village or hamlet till they had gone some miles. Then they came to a cluster of cottages, half-a-dozen perhaps, which seemed to have dropped down in the middle of a narrow lane by accident and to be rather surprised at their own appearance.

A quarter of an hour more and they drove through a large white gate, into an avenue of linden-trees, and so at last reached a pretty-looking white stone house, which seemed to Violet perfectly buried in trees.

"It must be very dull for the children!" was her unspoken thought. And then they had stopped at the front door, which a decent-looking woman of the cottage class held open, while she accomplished a series of bows which at any other moment would have induced Violet to fits of laughter.

Somehow just now her surroundings were too weird and sombre for her to feel inclined to laugh.

The old crone ushered her into a sitting-room and shut the door. For quite ten minutes Violet was alone, growing every moment more and more alarmed. Where were the children? After pressing her so affectionately to visit her, why did Mrs. Ainslie behave so strangely?

Everything was so still that Violet could hear every tick of the clock, and when it struck two, in a loud business-like manner, she started as nervously as if she had heard the explosion of a cannon.

She had hardly got over the shock when the door slowly opened and someone came in. Violet Nairn turned to meet her hostess with outstretched hand. Then she grew pale as marble, and every drop of blood in her veins seemed to run cold.

It was not Mrs. Ainslie! The woman who came to meet her with a

mocking smile and scornful black eyes was the only creature for whom gentle Violet had ever nourished a dislike; the intruder who had made her last days at the Creek so full of misery—in a word—Cora Winter!

Innocent though she was, Violet Nairn was no simpleton. She knew that Miss Winter would not have forged an invitation in Mrs. Ainslie's name and brought her to this lonely-house without some serious object. It came home to her with a keen sense of pain and misery that she was utterly at her enemy's mercy.

She had seen the woman who admitted her walk down the avenue.

In this lonely house she might shriek till she was hoarse and no one would hear her. Quick as thought her determination was taken. She would leave this ill-omened place at once, without a single word to Cora.

She made for the door, but Miss Winter intercepted her.

"Not so fast, young lady! I have some business to transact with you before you leave Woodbine Cottage!"

"I wish to go at once. I have nothing to do with you. I should never have come to this place had I expected to find you here!"

"I dare say not. That door fastens with a spring, and you cannot open it without the key, which is now in my pocket. You are in my power, and had better listen!"

"I have no choice," said Violet, proudly; "but be brief. I will not sleep a night beneath your roof. I shall return to town at once!"

Cora smiled. Her smile was terrible, so full was it of malice and spite.

"You prefer the society of Dermot Rutherford to mine. He has been taken with your babyish face, and paid you a few compliments till I dare say you fancied he was in love with you. You had better undeceive yourself on this point. Dermot needs money too desperately to marry anyone but an heiress. He is engaged to Vana Doyle."

"I don't believe it!"

And she did not. Dermot had spoken no words of love to Violet, but his manner, his every action, the very tone of his voice, had told her she was dear to him.

"Oh, you don't," said Cora Winter, scornfully, "then I am afraid I shall be under the necessity of keeping you here until his marriage with Vana is an accomplished fact. You had better take off your hat, my dear. I mean you to be my guest for the next few days!"

Violet answered nothing; but she was painfully conscious her nerves were too shaken for her to oppose her enemy. She had always feared Cora Winter, especially when she looked at her with the black eyes which always seemed to possess some magnetic power over the younger girl. Cora kept her eyes now fixed steadily on Violet's face, and the girl's will-power seemed to desert her. It was as though she had no mind of her own, and her intelligence were a mere blank. She was just an instrument upon which Cora could play as she listed.

A third person would have been frightened at the change in the girl's face. The limpid eyes had a dull, heavy expression. The whole countenance seemed that of a person whose mind was far away. Violet looked more like a sleep-walker, or a person in a mesmeric trance, than anything else.

Cora Winter began to sing a low dirge-like melody. Her unhappy victim chanted it after her note by note, and then the cruel woman knew that her work was complete.

Her victim had entered into the hypnotic state which forbade all resistance to her will.

"Come," she said slowly, "we will go upstairs."

With her arm linked in Violet's she led the way. She did not pause at the next story, but went on to the top of the house. It was here in the front room that the murder had been committed last year which gave Woodbine Cottage such an evil name.

Cora had laid her plans clearly. She knew that even if cries and groans were heard, no creature in the neighbourhood would have the courage to enter that room.

"You are tired," she said, gravely. "You would like to rest."

She helped the girl on to a couch, and covered her with a light shawl. She placed a jug of water and a loaf of bread by her side, made a few more passes with her hands, and then, as Violet's slumber grew deeper and more profound, she went softly from the room, turned the key in the lock, and left Violet a prisoner.

The old woman who did the rough work for the tenant of Woodbine Cottage (on the express stipulation that her services were only required by daylight) was standing at the cottage door when that lady drove by on her way to Norton station.

"I am going up to London, Mrs. Johnson," said Cora, cheerfully. "I begin to think you are right, and Woodbine Cottage is too dull for anyone living alone, so I am going to give up possession. You know I only had the house for a week on trial."

"No one will ever live there," said Mrs. Johnson, mournfully. "And how you could be brave enough to sleep in that house alone at night, just one lone female, beats me entirely!"

"I think I got a little frightened," explained Cora. "There are a few coals and one or two other things you may as well have, Mrs. Johnson, and here's half-a-sovereign to remember me by."

"I'm sure I thank you kindly, mum. And the young lady, and the smart little boy—I suppose they've gone on first?"

"The lady only came on business. She went back to Wainleigh almost directly. I sent the lad on in front with a message."

To the few cottagers about Woodbine Cottage the "smart little lad" who sometimes drove the pony carriage for Cora was a mystery.

Where he came from, what his name was, they had no idea. They never saw him with his mistress; but being simple homely folks the true explanation never occurred to them—which was, that Cora had brought a smart livery suit with her from London, and masqueraded as a boy-groom,

when intent on business she did not care to undertake in her own character.

So Violet Nairn was left in a deserted house; a prisoner in a room every creature in the neighbourhood believed haunted; as unconscious as yet of her peril as were the friends who loved her so dearly.

CHAPTER XI.

It was impossible to keep the fact of her cousin's danger from Lucy Clive; but at her request nothing was said at Stoneleigh of Violet's peril.

"Don't you see," said Mrs. Clive, eagerly, "it would only lay the burden of a secret on Kathleen; for while Captain Rutherford believes so firmly in his guess we must not let him know our suspicions."

Kenneth Hurst was called into council. He had this advantage over the Nairns: that (as Kathleen's fiancé) he had seen and spoken to the heiress.

"Mark my words," he said to his partner, "if Miss Doyle has got your cousin under her power she will mesmerize her and keep her will completely under her own control. You have only got to look at that woman's eyes to know she possesses hypnotic gifts in no small degree, while Miss Nairn's nervous system is so sensitive and delicately strung she would be a ready victim to the fatal power."

"Believe no letters," he went on slowly, "even if you could swear to the handwriting; trust no messages; believe nothing until you see the poor girl with your own eyes."

It was a bitterly cold morning, and the newspaper train goes at an abnormally early hour. The three men met at Liverpool Street station. Dermot had slept at his godfather's so as not to excite the curiosity of the *sausage* at Stoneleigh. It was far too early for the post-office to be open when they reached Chelmsford, so Mr. Finch, who was very calm and business-like, declared they had better breakfast before they did anything else.

"Look here, my boy," he said, when Dermot declared he could eat nothing, "you won't help that poor child by starving yourself. What you want to do is to keep well and strong, so that you may have every power of mind and body at its best to do her service."

"Mr. Finch is quite right," said Tom Clive, kindly. "Before we have finished our quest we shall need our best efforts, and to go breakfastless will only impair them."

Breakfast and a warm at a blazing fire did something to make them take a more hopeful view of things; but Dermot was almost faint with anxiety when, as the clock struck eight, he entered the post-office.

"Mrs. Ainslie!" the clerk repeated; "he did not know anyone of that name near, but a telegram had certainly come so addressed two days ago. It had been fetched by a smart little tiger, who said that his mistress had lately come to reside at Wainleigh, which," went on the clerk, who was a talkative youth, "explained her having the telegram sent her. Anyone but a stranger would have known that Norton is the post town for Wainleigh."

They had gained nothing, absolutely nothing, by their visit to Chelmsford. They went on by the next train to Wainleigh. The weather had changed now, and a thick sleet was falling, accompanied by a nipping wind. It was the last day on which anyone would have made an expedition by choice to an unknown country village.

The porter at the station answered their questions readily. A young lady had come by the 12.45 yesterday. A smart little trap had been waiting for her, driven by a lad in livery.

The lad seemed afraid to leave his pony, and had asked him (the porter) to watch for a young lady travelling alone, and tell her he had come from Mrs. Ainslie's.

Mr. Finch took out half-a-sovereign.

"Look here, my man, put that in your pocket, and try to answer me a few questions as clearly as you can. If you help us to find that young lady there'll be another for you."

The porter promised.

"I'll do my best, gentlemen; but I'd never seen that groom before. It wasn't the livery of any family in these parts."

"And the trap?"

"The trap and pony were nothing out of the common. You may see two or three just the same pattern any day in Norton. They drove straight out of the station road without going through the village; but there's a sign-post a little further on where four roads meet."

Dr. Clive interposed.

"Is there a school here?"

"Yes, sir!" scratching his head.

"And the children are free from twelve to two? Don't you think some of them might have been near the sign-post, and have seen which road the trap took? Or are carriages so common here they would not notice it?"

"They'd notice it sharp enough, sir," returned the porter; "and there ain't many traps about here in winter. The young un's are out for ten minutes' play at half-past ten, and if you stepped round to the school you'd soon find out."

"That was a lucky thought of yours," said Mr. Finch, as they made their way to the old-fashioned red-brick school.

Dr. Clive improved on it. Finding that the school only had one teacher, a Miss Wiggins, he indited a pencil note to her, when, after stating he was in great distress owing to the disappearance of a young lady living under his care, he mentioned she was seen driving towards the sign-post about ten minutes to one on the previous day, did Miss Wiggins think any of her pupils had noticed the trap, and could they tell which

road it took? The young lady was slight and fair; the groom dark and foreign-looking.

A big girl in a white apron took in the note, and after a minute or two's delay Miss Wiggins herself came to interview the strangers.

"I noticed the trap myself," she said pleasantly, "for I was standing by the sign-post when it passed, and I thought the young lady looked scared. I had never seen either her or the groom before; and I had the curiosity to watch which way they went: they took the road by the brook."

"And where does that lead?"

Miss Wiggins was a native of the place.

"It leads nowhere straight, except to a farm, but if you turn and twist about a lot it brings you out in Love Lane. Woodbine Cottage, where the murder was, is about half a mile further."

The three men looked at each other.

"Woodbine Cottage is shut up, I suppose?" said Mr. Finch.

"No, sir, it's lately been taken by a lady—quite a young person she is. She actually sleeps there alone, and my aunt, Mrs. Johnson, goes in of a morning to do for her. My aunt pointed her out to me two days ago, when I was spending the day with her. You see we only began school again yesterday."

The gentlemen thanked the little school mistress and withdrew. It was Tom Clive who made the first suggestion.

"Depend upon it Vana Doyle has taken Woodbine Cottage, and is keeping Violet a prisoner there. The ill-odour into which the house has fallen would just play into her hands."

Dermot looked up with a strangely solemn face.

"The school only began again yesterday. Had this fiend fixed her scheme only one day earlier we should have lost all clue."

There was an inn at Wainleigh called the "Blue Boar," and here the trio managed to hire a vehicle and a man to drive them over to Woodbine Cottage.

The landlord told them civilly that just after the murder he did a thriving trade in taking parties of excursionists to see the scene of the tragedy, but that all excitement and interest in the matter had long since died out.

Meeting Miss Wiggins, superintending her pupils during their recess, she gave the friends one more piece of assistance by telling them her aunt always had the keys of Woodbine Cottage if its temporary tenant were away, and that when unlet she was allowed to show strangers over the house.

"Can you tell us one thing more?" asked Mr. Finch. "What is the name of the present tenant?"

"Winter, sir! She made a little joke of it when she came, and said her name matched the month."

"Dermot," said his godfather, as they drove off, "every link in the chain is being discovered. You may be quite certain that the girl who died in Melbourne was Vana Doyle. Your father's visitor is Miss Winter!"

Mrs. Johnson received them with *empressment*. Show them Woodbine Cottage?—that she would with pleasure. At one time she made many a shilling by taking people over it. Only she could not go upstairs to the room. They must look over that by themselves if they wanted to, and she'd not set foot in the house at all after nightfall. Haunted?—of course it was. Why, the poor young lady who'd been trying to live there confessed the noises and things were too much for her, and had gone away only yesterday.

"Had Miss Winter anyone staying with her?" asked Tom.

"No, sir. There was a boy-groom used to come backwards and forwards to see after the pony (she hired a trap from Norton), and a lady came yesterday on business; but no one slept at the Cottage but Miss Winter."

"Did the lady leave with her?"

"No, sir. She went first, but as Miss Winter had the pony to go to Norton, I can't make out how she got to Wainleigh station unless she walked."

It was bitterly cold. The sleet still fell, and the three men were fairly drenched. Mrs. Johnson wanted them to dry themselves at her fire, but they preferred to inspect Woodbine Cottage.

True to her word, Mrs. Johnson declined to accompany them to the top of the house.

"There are three rooms, sir, and you can look at 'em all," she told Mr. Finch, who, from his age, she put down as the head of the party; "but if I went with you I should have the creeps all night, so I'd best stay here."

We know what they found. The last room they entered had signs of recent occupation, and there, stretched on the couch, white and insensible, and so still, they thought her dead, was the girl they sought.

Tom Clive took the command then.

"Dead! Not a bit of it," he cried, "but she must not come to her senses here, or she may lose her reason with fright and terror. There's only one thing for it. The host at the 'Blue Boar' looked a decent fellow, and his wife seemed capable. We must wrap Violet up in blankets and carry her to the trap. If the man drives fast we shall be there in three-quarters of an hour. Far better that she should not recover consciousness till she is away from this accursed place."

Mr. Finch engaged Mrs. Johnson in conversation in the back sitting-room while the other two carried their slight burden downstairs through the leafless avenue to the gate where the trap waited.

"Look here," said Tom to the coachman, who was son to the proprietor of the "Blue Boar," "hold your tongue about this at Wainleigh, and you'll be none the loser."

"Right sir," said the young man intelligently, and then Mr. Finch having rewarded Mrs. Johnson, joined them and they were off.

To this day the host and hostess of the "Blue Boar" believe firmly that the unconscious girl brought to their house was the unlucky tenant of Woodbine Cottage whom her courage in trying to live there had indeed cost dear. They

took a deep interest in the guest, and prepared a big lavender-scented chamber for her, where the fire soon roared half-way up the chimney, and Mrs. Markham with her own hands undressed the poor girl while Dr. Clive telegraphed to his wife.

"Found. Come to Wainleigh by the next train. Get Kathleen Rutherford to stay with the children."

CHAPTER XII.—AND LAST.

It was a week after that terrible Saturday, day for day, and Violet Nairn, looking very pale and shadowy, was on the sofa in the drawing-room at the Priory, with her hand clasped in Dermot's.

His love had been told now and answered. He and Violet were to walk down life's pathway together.

She was still too weak and overwrought to hear the whole story of her escape, but her friends knew every detail now of the imposition practised on them, for Mrs. Ainslie had received a letter from Melbourne commenting on the death of Vana Doyle, and the fact of her companion, Miss Winter, having rushed off to England with all the dead girl's property, not even troubling to let her friends at the Creek know of her death.

Upon the receipt of this letter Mr. Finch communicated with Mr. Doyle's English agent to hear that he had learned by that mail of Miss Vana's death, and was even then writing to Dermot Rutherford to inform him by her father's will he was her heir-at-law.

For Violet's sake, because it would have been so terribly painful to her to give evidence against her persecutor, no attempt was made to punish Cora Winter for her cruel attempt on Miss Nairn's life. Dermot, in a few bitter words, told her what he thought of her. As Vana Doyle's heir-at-law he was the owner of the money and valuables she had stolen from her dead friend, and it was in his power to punish her for her theft and impersonation. He offered, however, to let her go scot free on condition she never came near him or any member of his family again, which liberal terms she was quite sharp enough to accept.

Captain Rutherford felt the deception played on him very deeply; but his depression did not prevent his suggesting that, old Doyle having been his friend and not Dermot's, it was his son's manifest duty to hand over the fortune to his father, but this duty Dermot declined to perform.

"I will allow you five hundred a year, sir, and lend a hand with the boys' education and start in life, but I cannot promise more."

Kenneth Hurst and Kathleen were very warm in their congratulations. Mr. Finch, who seemed to think Dermot's accession to wealth necessitated his renouncing his post at the office, suggested there should be a double wedding, and that Dermot might take his wife abroad for the rest of the winter.

"She looks much too pale and thin," he said, affectionately. "Clive declares that she must not spend March in England, and no one could take better care of her than her husband."

The old man seemed most anxious to hurry on Dermot's wedding. "One

would really have thought," said naughty Nora Rutherford, "he was afraid of Violet's being jilted."

It was not till Violet Rutherford and her husband returned to England late in April that they learned *why* Mr. Finch had been so anxious nothing should delay their wedding. Violet's resemblance to some of the pictures in the gallery of Soham Court had made him ask Mrs. Clive a few questions respecting her cousin's parentage. When he found that her mother, Dorothy Fane, had been christened after her grandmother, a beautiful girl, who lost a fortune through an angry stepmother's jealousy, he began to feel he was on the track. He despatched a confidential clerk to America, where Mr. and Mrs. Linton had emigrated, with such good results that he brought back papers and documents proving that Violet was in deed and truth the great grandchild of that beautiful Dorothy to whom Lady Lintón had left, as an act of restitution, the whole of her father's property.

"I wouldn't tell you my suspicions till you were safely married," said Mr. Finch to Dermot, with a grunt. "You'd have tried to jilt her."

Dermot smiled. He was thinking of the gipsy Zilla, and how wonderfully her prophecy had been fulfilled.

"I little thought when Lady Linton gave me those diamonds for my wife," touching the ring Violet wore as a guard, "that she was really giving them to the last descendant of her husband's family."

"And so you'll be two of the richest commoners in England," said Tom Clive. "You'll be cutting humble folks like us."

"Never!" said Violet and Dermot in one breath. "Don't we owe all our happiness to you?"

"Katy will believe more firmly than ever in carols now," said Mrs. Dermot, smiling. "On Christmas Eve she heard some men singing the one about three ships coming sailing in, and she took it into her head that the ships were three fortunes. She has long since decided that Mr. Hurst was *hers*, and the Doyle property Dermot's, but I think it puzzled her a little to find mine."

And Kathleen took just the course predicted.

"I shall never forget last Christmas Eve," she said to Violet. "I think it was the most miserable day in my life. We seemed poorer than we had ever been before. The false Vana Doyle had invaded us, a man in possession had taken up his abode in the kitchen, and I hardly knew how to get a supper for either of them. I was just in despair, VI, and I went to bed feeling as if things were so bad nothing mattered any more."

"And then you heard the carol!"

"Yes. I knew perfectly 'the ships' really meant nothing to do with money; but ever since I was a child I had heard papa talk of doing things 'when his ship came in,' and I couldn't help taking the carol as a promise that very soon our ships would really come sailing in."

"They are safe in harbour now, Katy," said her brother affectionately, —he had come up in time to hear her last words.

"Yes, Dermot," she answered, with tears shining in her beautiful Irish eyes, "but weren't they a long time before they crossed the bar?"

[THE END]

SUPERSTITIONS CONCERNING THE MISTLETOE.

THE mistletoe was with the Druids an object of much higher veneration than the oak. They were accustomed to strew leaves and branches of the latter around their altars; but in honour of the former they had special ceremonies. Every year they assembled to receive what they regarded as gifts from the gods. A priest arrayed in white ascended the tree in the presence of the people, and, with a consecrated golden knife, cut the mistletoe, and threw it down into a sheet held for its reception. It was then distributed to the people, who preserved it with the utmost care, or gave small pieces to their friends as valuable new year's presents. They had not always, however, golden knives with which to perform the operation of cutting, and were obliged to use an inferior metal.

In the "Medælic History of Carausius," by Stukeley, the writer, in speaking of the winter solstice, our Christmas, says:—"This was the most respectable festival of our Druids, called yule-tide; when mistletoe, which they called 'all-heal,' was carried in their hands and laid on their altars, as an emblem of the salutiferous advent of the Messiah. The mistletoe they cut off the trees with their upright hatchets of brass, called 'colts,' put upon the ends of the staffs which they carried in their hands. Innumerable are these instruments found all over the British isles. The custom is still preserved in the north, and was till lately at York. On the eve of Christmas Day they carry mistletoe to the high altar of the Cathedral, and proclaim a public and universal liberty, pardon, and freedom to all sorts of inferior and even wicked people at the gates of the city, towards the four quarters of heaven." This was less than a century and a half ago.

All the northern nations of Europe entertained a great respect for the mistletoe at the time of the year when the sun approached the winter solstice, and the use of the plant was not unknown to the ancient Greeks and Romans, for we find allusions made to it in Virgil, who compares the golden bough in Inferno to the mistletoe. And some remnant of these ancient superstitions remain with us to this day, for we cannot gaze upon it without some slight feeling of reverence, although utterly disconnected with any religious ceremony, unless it be that of matrimony.

Mr. Archdeacon Nares says:—"The custom longest preserved was the hanging-up of a bush of mistletoe in the kitchen or servants'-hall, with the charm attached to it that the maid who was not kissed under it at Christmas would not be married in that year." Of course, we would not charge our maidens of the present day with believing in such a superstition as this, but there are probably few of them who would like the season to pass away without having one kiss under the mistletoe. The mistletoe being so much associated at this period of the year with holly, laurel, ivy, and other evergreens, we find mention of it in connection with them by the poets. Gay says:

When rosemary and bay, the poet's crown,
Are bowled in frequent cries through all the town,
Then judge the festival of Christmas near—
Christmas the joyous period of the year!
Now with bright holly all the temples strow,
With laurel green and sacred mistletoe.



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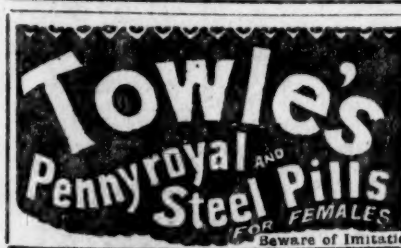
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